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A SINLESS SECRET.

A SINLESS SECRET.

BY "RITA,"

AUTHOR OF "MY LADY COQUETTE," "DAPHNE," "LIKE DIAN'S KISS,"
"VIVIENNE," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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so dainty in all her ways, the only wonder is she is not a thousand times more vain with all the flattery she has received since ever she could run through the village alone."

"She's come of a bad stock, and will bring no luck to any honest man's house," muttered the brown-faced Norman peasant-woman who stood gossiping in the market-place with her neighbours this fair summer morning.

"Ay ay, true enough," exclaimed a fresh-looking countrywoman, joining in the conversation with alacrity. "I remember her mother; the girl is just like her. She was beautiful if you like—handsomer far than ever Ninette will be. They came of a good family, and were very proud. The girl had a craze for the stage—she ran away to Paris——"

"Yes yes, we know all that," chimed in the market-women.

"Ah well, she came back, you remember, so changed; all her beauty faded, all her gay bright ways gone. And then the child was born. I nursed her. Dear heart, how she wept over the babe! It was so like its father, she said. And the pretty tales she told it, of how he would come to see it, and what it must do, and how it must look—she was such a child herself; and then time went on and he never came, and she pined and faded, and grew so pale and so thin, one would not have known her for the same."

"And he?" asked the gossips.

"He, of course, never came. She died with his name on her lips. A life thrown away for a man's sake! Ah well, it is common enough."

"Do you believe she was married?"

"I saw her wedding-ring. She always said he married her; but in that great vile city it would be so easy to deceive, and then—he never came."

"He has never been near the child either?"

"No; and the grandmother is so old now, and the girl so fair. Ah! it is a good thing for all that she will marry so soon, and have one so loving and steady as Pierre Leroux to look after her."

"It is to be hoped Pierre Leroux won't find it more than he can manage to do *that*," said the sour-visaged Rose Michel.

"True," echoed the others; "she is so gay and flighty. A pity one so well-to-do as Pierre did not choose a steady well-ordered maiden to keep his house and study his welfare. Ninette will want everything and give nothing."

"You have all daughters more suitable for Pierre Leroux than the girl he has chosen, is it not so?" laughed the cheerful-faced countrywoman who had spoken before. "A pity that he could not see it as plainly as you do!" and laughing and nodding to the knot of market-women, she passed on, with her basket poised on her head.

"Hush! here comes Ninette herself."

The gossiping tongues ceased. A score of curious eyes turned towards the street, up which a girl was coming—a girl with a face fair and fresh as a spring blossom, and a figure whose swelling curves and delicate outlines was shown to perfect advantage by the pretty Norman costume. She came gaily up to the group, nodding to one, laughing to another, chatting to all in her free, girlish, graceful fashion. Some answered her cheerfully, others seemed constrained and ill at ease.

"You will wish me joy for to-morrow, will you not?" she said, as she turned away at last. "To-morrow I shall be Ninette Leroux."

"No good comes of using your new name before it's your own," said the surly voice of Rose Michel. The girl laughed brightly.

"You were always one to croak, Rose," she said. "At all events there's no fear of you ever committing that mistake." The old maid looked sourly at the winsome face.

"A day may come when you will wish yourself in my place," she cried, with a spiteful bitterness in her raised and croaking voice. "It is not married life that brings the greatest joy, though the young and foolish always think it."

"Well, at all events, I mean to try," said the girl gaily. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind being in my place for once, Rose Michel, and doing the same;" and without waiting for further words she turned and went on her way up the sunny village street.

She did not hear the muttered curse that followed her. She did not see the vengeful expression on the wrinkled face and trembling lips; but Ninette, in all her fair and happy life, had never made a foe so fierce, an enemy so vindictive, as Rose Michel was now.

Pierre Leroux was a well-to-do miller—

a man young and handsome, and accounted a great match in this quaint little Norman town. His mill lay some way out, set amidst fields and orchards, and with an arm of the river winding through to turn the great wheel, whose sound was so sweet to Ninette's ear as it churned the foam-bells at her feet, and dashed the cool shower of water over her sweet flushed face.

She stood there now in the hot summer noon, her lover by her side, her eyes downcast, her little hands clasped round his arm, her fragile girlish loveliness looking doubly fragile and childish in contrast to the stalwart frame and sunburnt face of the young miller.

"It pleases you, then? It is all as you wish?" he was saying. The girl's face flushed, her shy eyes drooped more shyly.

"It is perfect—all," she said softly. "The whole place is beautiful."

"Not half good enough or beautiful enough for thee," he said passionately.

"My only wonder is that ever thou couldst bring thyself to love one so unworthy."

"In what way are you unworthy, Pierre?"

"I am so rough, so coarse. I am but one of the people, and you well-born, beautiful as an angel. True, I have some little learning, and a trick of speech that has served me well when the storms of warfare and faction threatened to disturb our little village; for the rest——"

"You are a hero, Pierre, and—I love you."

He drew her to his heart with hasty passion. He was delirious with the sudden joy those sweet bashful words had brought to him. Never before had gay, coquettish, laughing Ninette spoken so tenderly. Never before had she dropped the mask of carelessness, and let him see that for once she too could be loving, tender, grave. In words he could not thank her. He only clasped her in arms that had never hungered for living woman before, that were faithful, honest, true as few are, and kissed her with a lover's passion and a good man's reverence.

"You are content, my beautiful?" he murmured at last.

"If only you will love me always, as now," she answered, with the longing that comes to every woman's heart, when she knows that what is a lover's privilege will soon be a husband's right.

"Do you doubt it?"

"I shall not be your foolish giddy little sweetheart then, in whom you never will see fault or wrong," she whispered. "Oh Pierre, I am so faulty, so weak, so vain, you do not know."

"I do know. I know I love you with every fault, as I have loved no woman with every virtue. I know, with thirty years' experience of life, that to lose you now would be worse than death a thousand times, for you are my soul's soul, my life's life!"

The burning impetuous words half-awed half-gladdened the girl's young heart, even on the brink of that close and perfect happiness for which she longed. To be so much to another life, and she a thing so fragile, careless, weak! Almost it terrified her now.

The hot sun gleamed on the mill-water at their feet, the pigeons plumed their feathers on the gray stonework of the house, the sweet scent of dry crushed grasses, and ripened fruit, and summer roses filled all the air. In the dusky shadowy nook where they stood, a silence and a hush fell upon them. With the rapture of every heart-beat, with the throb of every pulse, the scene, and the hour, and the words were mingled, never again to be forgotten.

"Why do you tremble so?" he asked.

"Because for once, I fear——"

"For me? Surely you can trust me?"

"No; not for you," the girl said, in low hurried accents. "For myself."

Months after he remembered those words; now he smiled, and, bending down, kissed the lips that uttered them.

CHAPTER II.

A WEDDING GIFT.

THE mill was very old.

The family of Leroux had occupied it for generations past. It had come down from father to son successively, each new owner accepting it as his birthright, and bringing to it the toil, and care, and thrift which slowly and surely brought riches and comforts in their train.

Pierre Leroux, the present possessor, had succeeded to its ownership while still young. Unlike most of his race, who had been keen, sharp-witted, unlearned, hard-working men, he was fonder of book-lore than of the market-place and the cornfields, less sharp at bargaining than generous in giving, shy and reserved, but of strictest virtue and truest charity, a man whom many misjudged and but few loved.

" A good son and a kind master," so the people said, "but too much of a dreamer, and easily outwitted, and with no eye for a girl's merry smile, and no care for the passage of the wine-cup at the village tavern." Up to thirty years of age he had never seemed to give thought or glance to woman, but then suddenly and unexpectedly he had taken the fever of love in its worst and most dangerous form. Ninette Dax was the loveliest girl, the archest coquette, and the worst match in the village. She certainly was also the very last woman in the world anyone could expect to subjugate the quiet reserved Pierre Leroux. Nevertheless, she had done so with scarce an effort. He loved her at first sight, and with no thought or question as to who she might be.

The glow of her beauty dazzled and intoxicated him, till his sight grew blind and his brain reeled, and from that hour he had but one thought, one resolve left—to win her.

A life once launched on the tempestuous sea of passion, is not one to be envied. No more was Pierre Leroux's. He passed through fevers of jealousy, through fires of intoxication, through thorns of delirious joy, and restless pain, and sweet idolatry. His very coldness and indifference hitherto only made him an easier and a surer captive—his whole life was filled but with one memory—and dead to all else.

Ninette at first coquetted with—then feared—then loved this devoted and yet timid wooer. His eyes spoke, even though his lips were dumb—he scarcely knew himself how much they betrayed, how plainly their pathetic entreaties told of the love consuming him—of the madness and tumult that were at once so mingled and so name-less to his own bewildered brain. In his strong young manhood, with the loyal faith, the dauntless courage, the honesty and truth that made his nature at once so noble and so great, he lay at this girl's mercy as utterly as if he were a reed to be broken—a straw on a river's current. She first gloried in her power, then grew afraid of it—afraid, because the game begun in carelessness had turned to such terrible earnest—afraid, because though she had hitherto won love without scruple, and played with it as heedlessly as a child, yet now something of its pain and joy and wonder had touched her too; all that was purest, tenderest, most generous in her untutored nature had been called forth, and for the first time the worth of a great passion shamed her own unworthiness. Had she but known it, this very feeling proved her love to be at last true—at last womanly—for it is the greatest and most exalted type of a woman's passion when she feels its very depth and devotion are yet far short of what she would have them, when she lays them at the feet of the man who has won her heart, and deems the gift —nothing.

In every grade of life—in every type and phase of character—how the old story repeats itself!

The love of these two—a village girl and a Norman miller—might not seem to possess any striking characteristics, and yet the elements of tragedy lay beneath it—the materials of a romance terrible in its pathos, grand in its truth.

The quivering sunbeams danced on the river as it ran silver in the light. On the solitary level of the cornfields the hot rays poured their morning brilliance. The birds, hidden in delicious shadow, poured out their songs of welcome. The tall lindens and the straight solemn rows of poplars swayed gently in the cool early breeze; everywhere blazed the scarlet of poppies, the gold of the corn, the flame of tulips, the hues of roses.

Pierre Leroux stood and looked at it all in the glow of the summer dawn, while the song of a lark thrilled the silence with melody, and echoed his heart's own music. His lips smiled, his eyes brightened, as he looked at the beautiful, picturesque old house—the house where to-day his wife would be brought to reign henceforth in her gay girlish beauty as the idol of his life.

While he stood there thinking these thoughts, dreaming these dreams, the stillness around was broken by the beat of drums, the sound of marching feet. He started and looked away across the level golden fields to the white winding road beyond. He saw a gleam of colour, a flash of muskets, a cloud of dust between the flowering hedges and the slender poplar-stems. Nearer and nearer they came marching steadily up to the mill-entrance. He moved forward and stood before them.

"Whom do you seek?" he asked.

"A deserter," the officer in command answered him. "He escaped last night. Have you seen aught of him?"

"No," was the firm surprised answer.

"Well, see you harbour him not. There is a price on his head, and whoever conceals, or abets his escape, becomes amenable to the law. Here is a description of him."

He tossed a paper to the young man, his eyes, meanwhile, searching the orchard grounds and the old mill itself as if for the fugitive.

"Do you wish to make search?" asked Leroux. "You are quite at liberty to do so, as, to tell the truth, I am the last man in the world to show pity to a deserter. I sympathise too strongly with France now, to pardon any son who is base enough to forsake her in the struggle."

"You speak well," said the officer, glancing approvingly at the strong well-knit frame and handsome figure of the young miller. "Why do you not lend your aid in her service?"

The young man looked round at his possessions regretfully.

"I am not at liberty to do so. My race have been sons of toil for many generations past. This mill is my heritage; besides——"

"What besides?"

A soft sweet smile crossed Pierre's grave face; his eyes brightened with exulting joy.

"I am about to be married," he said.

"Oh, a good enough reason for stopping at home. But take care you are not called out. Things look very black now. These devilish Prussians are hitting us hard. They say that every man fit for service will be summoned ere long."

The bronzed face of the young miller paled perceptibly. The golden motes of the dancing air quivered before his eyes, the song of the rising lark lost its ringing music. Into his heart a fear crept, not for himself, but for her, the fair girl-wife, whom he might be called upon to leave, even in the first sweet days of wedded bliss.

"It is as France wills," he said; and then turned and led the way through the shadowy orchard grounds, and into the quaint old dusky chambers of the mill.

The search was in vain, of course. No likelihood was there of Pierre Leroux harbouring a deserter—a creature whom his bold courageous nature held in abhorrence, whom his tongue would have lashed with fiery scorn and stung with fierce rebuke. The soldiers accepted his offers of refreshment. The officer lingered a short while longer, chatting and laughing good-humouredly with his frank honest-eyed host; and then the whole party left, and went away through the green meadows, and along the winding field-paths, and so into the highroad once more. Pierre Leroux watched them, shading his eyes from the sunlight.

"Will they find him, I wonder?" he said to himself. "He deserves his fate if they do."

"Good-morrow, Pierre Leroux," said a voice beside him. "I have brought a present for thy wife that is to be. I am here betimes, am I not?"

He turned round.

"What, is it you, Rose Michel?"

"Ay, I have brought some flowers for thy bridal chamber. It is a poor gift, but I have none other to offer."

"The gift is welcome," he said kindly. "Will you go within?"

"Presently. Were those soldiers who left you just now?"

"Yes; they are searching for a deserter. Have you seen aught of a soldier loitering in the neighbourhood?"

"Not I. Did they give you news of the war?"

"Very bad news. They seem to think more volunteers will be needed."

"Ay, I heard so. Every able-bodied likely youth is to be called out. A sad day for us truly. You might have to go, Pierre. What would your bride say, think you?"

He was silent.

"Not but I daresay she would soon console herself," resumed Rose spitefully. "A born coquette is Ninette, and one that will need to be well looked after by the man who trusts his honour to her keeping."

The young man turned swiftly on her, his eyes blazing fire.

"How dare you say such words of my wife? She is all that is pure, and fair, and virtuous. Her only faults have been the faults of youth and lightheartedness."

"Love is blind," muttered the woman. "It will be well for you, Pierre Leroux, if you never rue to-day."

"Know you aught to Ninette's discredit?" he demanded fiercely.

"If I did I would hardly tell you," laughed the woman sneeringly. "It is ill work opening folks' eyes that love to be blind. You will find her out soon enough—soon enough."

And chuckling and laughing she went away into the bright, old, tiled kitchen, and up from thence to the quaint old chamber, which the bride was so soon to call her own. From place to place she moved, arranging the fronds of fern, and clusters of roses, and snowy wealth of lilies which filled her basket. The lovely delicate blossoms filled the room with fragrance and colour, and enhanced its snowy purity and dainty cleanliness. Rose glanced round it all with malicious eyes and envious heart.

"For a worthless chit like that to have such a home," she muttered. Then on the table, before the oval glass which would so soon reflect the young bride's face, she placed a bunch of deadly herbs—rue, nightshade, henbane.

"For luck," she chuckled maliciously; and then closed the door, and left the room to silence and sunshine.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE RISK.

THE wedding feast was over.

A fairer day had never shone on fairer bride. Great had been the festivities, and carried on with unceasing gaiety, while the tireless feet of the young men and maidens danced with unflagging ardour, and the mirth waxed high and reckless. The mill had been deserted all through the day's hot hours. The old mother had gone to the bridal feast, the farm-labourers had been holiday-making. In the quiet twilight there was neither sound nor voice to waken the echoes or disturb the stillness.

As the long shadows fell from the swaying branches, as the gloom deepened round the old gray house and through the quiet chambers, a man's figure crept stealthily beneath the hedge-rows, and glided velvet-footed into the deserted kitchen. His clothes were dusty and disordered, his face darkly flushed; his eyes glanced from side to side as if in deadly terror. Through the sweet summer air came the echo of glad voices, the ring of girlish laughter. He started and shook in every limb, as if the fear and horror so long struggled with had now completely mastered him.

"What to do now?" he muttered, as he stood there in doubt, while the stars looked through the open casement, and the roses nodded in the evening breeze.

With a sudden impulse of desperation he stole up the narrow stairs, and crept into the room which Rose Michel had decorated for the coming of the bride. He hurriedly concealed himself in one of the oaken presses, just as footsteps sounded below, and the laughter and welcome to the new-made wife rang out on the evening air.

"The women come first," he thought. "She will save me. She must!"

Presently a light footfall came up the stairs; a radiant girlish figure, candle in hand, stood on the threshold. She came in with the laughter on her lips, and the light in her eyes, that had echoed her farewell to the merry group below, came in and went straight up to the table, where the oval glass reflected her glad young beauty, and the deadly and ominous herbs threw their poisonous fragrance around. As her eyes fell on them she started and turned pale as death.

"Who put them there?" she cried, half in wonder, half in terror. As the words left her lips the old carved press suddenly opened; a man sprang out and threw himself at her feet.

Terror held her silent. Her lips parted, but no sound came. "*You* here!" she cried at last.

He caught her hands and poured out rapid eager words, words that paled her cheek to the hues of death, and robbed her beauty of all its glad and joyous youth. "Is this thing true?" she gasped.

"I swear it is! As you hope for happiness, as I look for pardon, by every claim, by every right I possess over you, Ninette, you *must* save me now!"

"But he—my husband?" the pale lips faltered.

"If you breathe a word, you know the consequences. Hasten from this; there is not a moment to lose. Will you do what I ask?"

"Heaven help me," she moaned, "I have no choice!"

"Then come. Our time is short; a few moments more, and he will be here."

"Follow me," the girl said calmly, though her ashy cheeks and quivering lips showed the terror that held her in its bondage. She stole down the stairway, the man following her like a shadow. With the shrinking motion and cowering step of guilt or fear they hurried through the dusky paths.

"Quick, quick: I hear their voices!" cried the man, as he seized her arm in a rough grasp.

"That is the place," the girl whispered, pointing to a boat-shed in the heaviest shadows of the willow-trees. "Lie there till I come. I will row you to the ruins half-a-mile farther up the river. No one ever goes there; the people all say they are haunted. You will be safely concealed till the danger is past."

"You will not fail," he cried hoarsely, as she turned away, "and you will not betray me?"

"Have I not promised?"

"*He* would give me up remorselessly, remember that. My blood will be on your head; and Ninette, you loved me once."

"Do not fear me," the young sad voice half-wailed, half-sighed. "And now farewell."

He crept into the boat-house silently, while, sick at heart and crushed with a dark foreboding of coming evil, the girl flew back through the quiet starlight to her husband's home.

She was barely in time, even then. The villagers who escorted him thither were noisily chorusing their songs and welcome at the gate, but never noticed the flitting figure that glided into the dark old porch, and stood white and trembling on the threshold of her home once more. "God help me," she sobbed in her terror and her anguish. "What can I do? If I am discovered we are both lost. On my head his blood would lie—so he said. Oh heavens! and the tie between us is one that he will never forego—that I can never forget. Oh

Pierre, if you but knew the secret that I hold, you would spurn me from your home, your heart, for ever!"

The sound of a coming footfall reached her ears; the patter of the leaves rustling to the ground, the cry of a night-owl seeking its prey, all sounded doubly loud, doubly terrifying, to her strained and shaken senses. She turned to the glass, and laid aside her kerchief and cap, and lifted up her arms to loosen the rippling masses of her glorious hair. Her pallor frightened herself.

"He will surely notice it," she said, as her shaking hands busied themselves in brushing out the golden clouds that veiled her whole slight form. Suddenly a thought flashed across her. She let her hair fall from her hands, and hurried to the chest in the corner of the room, which contained her clothing and the few possessions that had been that day transported from her old home.

Hastily tossing away garment after garment, she came at last to a small box, which she opened with trembling hands; she took a tiny phial, containing some colourless liquid, from this receptacle, and poured some of its contents into a drinking-cup that stood on the old oak press. Then, from a jug of water near at hand she filled the cup three parts full, and placed it on her table. "To deceive him already!" she muttered. "Oh how vile and wicked I seem!"

As the thought was in her heart, her husband entered. The sight of that lovely little apparition, with the rippling hair and bare white arms, dazzled him, and held him spell-bound.

"Ninette," he murmured passionately, "oh say, do I dream? is it indeed you? Are you my own, my very own at last?"

The blood rushed over her face, changing all its pallor and fear to the glowing loveliness of old. "Surely yes," she said softly, and stole to his side with the shy timid grace of a child, and wound her arms around his neck, and laid her head upon his breast, while his kisses fell in showers upon her loosened hair and up-turned face. And all the time in her heart she was saying: "Oh if he knew—if he knew!"

He knew nothing, cared for nothing, saw or heard nothing now, save that she was there in his arms, while the heavy throbs of his heart beat audibly on the stillness, and her beauty gleamed in the dusky light of the quaint old chamber with a seductive force that held him like a spell. She drew herself away at last.

"Pierre," she said, laughing and blushing, "I am so thirsty? Could you bring me a little wine? There is water here, and a cup."

In an instant he hurried away, returning almost immediately with what she desired. She took the bottle from his hand, and poured some of its contents into the cup on the table; then put it to her lips, and seemed to drink a long draught.

"Now I will pour some out for you," she said, and raised the bottle again, and handed the replenished cup to him, and smiled on him while he drank it with a smile that intoxicated him more than the most potent draught could have done. He put down the cup—it was empty. A few moments after, the words on his lips, the smile in his eyes, all changed to utter stupor. He stretched his arms out feebly, gropingly, as a blind man might. The girl seized them, and guided him gently to the bed. He threw himself down, and with a heavy sigh sank into a sleep so deep, profound, and breathless, that it looked almost like unconsciousness.

Ninette bent over him in terror.

"How quickly it took effect," she said. "For three hours now I am safe. His mother does not return; the servants sleep away from the house; there is no one to hear or see. Oh heaven, give me courage for the task before me! Were I indeed guilty, I could not look or feel it more than I do."

She bound up her fallen tresses, and throwing a dark cloak round her, which covered her from head to foot, stole out of the room, and out of the house, and so on to the riverside beyond.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET.

THE night had fallen dark and hot and sultry.

With swift feet and trembling limbs the girl hastened on. She reached the boat-house, and a hurried whisper told the hidden fugitive that all was safe. He crept out and helped her unloose the clumsy flat-bottomed market-boat, and they both entered it, and drifted off into the swift-flowing current. The man took the oars, the girl the tiller-rope, and, without a word save the whispered directions he needed, they floated on through the hushed hot darkness.

"Is it far?" the man asked presently.

"No."

"How have you managed to get away?" he whispered curiously. A slight sob rose in the girl's throat.

"I have made a good beginning, truly. My first act towards my husband has been to deceive him."

"He will not discover you—you are sure?" he questioned, in alarm.

"No, I did my work too well."

"And you regret, already?"

"I never said so."

"No, but your voice, your face, all show it."

"Since when have you learnt to read them so accurately?"

"Child, child, do not torture me. Do you not know that every look, every accent of yours, brings back the past as though it were but yesterday. Do you not know that my love——"

"Do not speak of love," she cried, with

sudden tempestuous anger; "the wrong I have done tortures me sufficiently. I think of *his* love, and how I have already repaid it."

"My claim is greater than his. I have a right stronger—surer. You know it."

"I know it," she said calmly, looking straight on, past the troubled pleading face, to the gloom of the waters beyond.

"You are sorry, grieved, that I came again. Oh Ninette! and once you told me your love and duty would never fail."

"Have they done so?"

"Not in the letter, but in the spirit—yes."

"Can I help it? The task is beyond my strength. When I stood on the threshold of new joys—of the deepest bliss my life had ever known—you dashed the cup from my lips, you stole the joys from my heart. It is not for myself I care, even now, so much as for him. He trusts me so utterly."

"Pooh! I thought you were above such foolish weakness. Do you love this man, then?"

"That concerns me only."

"It is true he has many fine points of honour. Your little trick to-night would shame you for ever in his eyes, once he knew of it."

"Is it for you to utter such words?" she asked him passionately. "Why do you love to torture me?"

"I do not wish to pain you, Ninette," he stammered huskily. "Heaven knows I have more need of your reproaches than you of mine!"

"If you know that, be silent now; speech is useless."

He leaned back, and plied his oars in silence. Thought was busy within him, and some remorse touched even his callous heart for the wrong and the suffering he was bringing on this girl's young life. He remembered all she had endured, all she must still endure; and some dim sense of shame moved him, as he thought of the shadows he had cast on the morning of her youth, the glories of her womanhood.

Through the darkness loomed now a square stone building, half in ruins, and built upon the river's edge. In winter the waters often flooded it. Ghostly tales were told by the peasants, far and near, respecting the spirits of murdered men who haunted its deserted chambers. The girl pointed suddenly towards it.

"That is the place," she said. "No man or woman in all the country round dare venture there."

The boat was steered close to the walls, which were deep bedded in the soil, and half-hidden by the river-reeds and osiers which grew thick and dense around. The girl threw the rope around a portion of the jutting stonework; he then laid down his oars and stood up.

"You can climb through there—can you not?" said Ninette, pointing to the arch of a window above their heads. "The stones are like steps. I have often been in myself for curiosity: there is a large hall; underneath are vaults. If you need a light, go to the vaults; otherwise from the river you may be seen: see, I have brought you a lantern and matches, and here are bread and wine and meat. The larder was well stocked for my home-coming. Within three days, if possible, I will come again. My signal will be three hoots of the night-hawk. Now hasten; every moment is precious."

"How will you return?"

"The stream is with me—I shall have no trouble."

"And you will not forget," he urged, laying his hand on her arm as they stood on the swaying boat.

"Do not fear," she said bitterly. "I will be here if I live."

"You are a brave girl," he said, with a gleam of admiration in his eyes, as he looked at the pale beauty of the young determined face. "For your sake I am almost sorry I have made you do this thing."

"It is no time now for reproaches or regrets," she answered coldly. "What is done is done. If anyone suffers for to-night's work, rest assured it will not be yourself."

He bent down and kissed her brow—she neither inviting nor repelling the caress; then taking the bundle from her hand, he rapidly ascended the jutting stonework, and poising himself an instant on the ledge, dropped noiselessly into the ruined hall within.

A faint gleam of moonlight parted the heavy clouds, and reflected itself on the surface of the dark still waters. In the pallid shadowy light the girl's face looked almost deathlike. She waited an instant for the signal that announced his safety, then loosened the boat, and was borne on the rapid impetuous current, back to the mill-house again.

The few effortless strokes of the oar in the backward passage cost her no exertion; the rush of the rising wind, and the dash of the river-foam, seemed rather to invigorate than to alarm her. The fantastic forms of the drifting clouds above her head, the swaying shadows thrown on the dark waters from either bank, the breath of the chill wind on her hair, the swirl and rush of the rapid waters that closed her in on every side—all these suited her mood, and braced her energies, and gave a strange fearless audacity to her smile, a more dauntless grace to her form.

She sprang out at the landing-place, and moored the boat once more—then with light flying steps ran into the house, and closed the door behind her.

Her heart throbbed fast as she entered. Unfastening her wooden shoes, she stole with cautious footsteps up the stairs; the door was ajar; the light of the pale sickly moon struggled through the clouds, and fell across the casement. The dark figure on the bed lay motionless—his heavy regular breathing alone disturbed the silence. "Thank God!" she murmured; "oh thank God!" and straightway fell on her knees before the wooden crucifix, and wept and prayed in the very abandonment of joy and glad relief.

She thought she was safe.

Safe? For all that Love's blindness might have discovered she was; but she never thought that Hate has a thousand eyes, and that while Love sleeps and dreams, it is awake and watchful.

* * * * *

"I would have speech with you, Pierre Leroux." The young miller started, and turned towards the speaker.

"It is you, Rose Michel. Have you come to see Ninette?"

"No, I have come to see you."

It was close on sunset; Pierre stood by

the riverside, where he had halted a moment for rest and coolness after the labours of the day. Smilingly, he turned to the woman who had so abruptly addressed him. His heart was so light, his life so happy; he had neither a fear nor a care in the world now, save a touch of anxiety for the week-old wife, whose face was paler than he cared to see—whose eyes were less bright than their wont, or so it seemed to his fond fancy.

"To see me? What is it?" he asked carelessly, and all the time his eyes rested on the rose-covered porch where the fairy-figure he so loved was used to stand and watch for his home-coming.

"It is a matter serious enough—you have enjoyed your fool's paradise a week. Do you care to come out of it now?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, with sudden anger.

"The earth and air are good," muttered Rose Michel, "but the heart of woman is evil." A vague fear stirred within the young man's breast; his eyes left the solitary porch, and turned to the brown harsh visage beside him.

" Say on," he said mechanically.

" You will not thank me for opening your eyes," the woman answered coldly. " Those who love never do; but it is well to ask you if you are aware that your wife goes out at midnight to meet—a lover. I have seen her twice with my own eyes—and she your wife but a week!"

The man's face grew white as death; he leaned forward—his hands clutching the boughs before him, his heart and pulse seeming to stand still, as if the very life in him was suspended by the agony he suffered.

" What foul lie is this?" he hissed between his close-set teeth.

" It is no lie, it is gospel truth," repeated the woman. " Twice within this week I have seen her steal away to the riverside, unloose the boat, and drift away down the river—how far I know not—she returns just between midnight and dawn. How comes it you have not found it out yourself, friend Pierre."

"It is false," he gasped. "Come with me straight into her presence, and there repeat this lie if you dare!"

"For what purpose? That she might frame some pretty tale to hoodwink you still further. No, Pierre Leroux, I can do better than that. You may prove the truth of my words yourself. You have but to watch and wait. The third night from this she will again go on her midnight errand. You must take heed you slumber not so soundly as of late; follow her to the waterside where the boat is kept; if my words are not true, then proclaim me through all the town as the foul-tongued slanderer you have called me."

The face before her grew dark with rising passion.

"If you were but a man!" he muttered

in the low fierce tones of an anger and indignation too deep for expression.

"You would kill me, I suppose, for daring to show you that the girl you deem so perfect is no better than many of her sex—perchance worse."

"Silence!" he thundered. "Dare not breathe such words of her in my ears."

"You are hard to convince," she sneered maliciously. "You believe everything she may choose to tell you. Ah well, you are not the first—perhaps you will not be the last."

"You called yourself her friend—once," he said, flashing a contemptuous glance on the woman's dark and vindictive face. The rebuke touched her. A flush of shame rose to her brow—then she laughed.

"Her friend, yes; that was before I knew her as she is. Besides, I pity you. You have cast all your heart on her. You love—therefore you are blind. I said so before. Of course you are bitter against me, because into your darkness I bring the light of truth. Men are ever so—where they love."

He shivered in the bright warm sunshine. His eyes turned blindly, darkly, on the deep brown waters at his feet, on the radiant azure-winged butterflies poised on the lily stems, on the scarlet-throated birds that darted in and out of the feathery blossoms of the limes. It was all so fair, so peaceful, so still. A few moments before he had looked on it with eyes so glad, and heart so thankful, and now—now a hideous darkness covered all. A terrible burden lay on his life which his strength could hardly bear. Yet, even through the misery that crushed and the pain that maddened him, his first thought was to defend her—to hurl back the foul aspersion he had heard. He loved her so utterly, so trustingly, doubt could not find an easy resting-place within his loyal soul.

"Have you said all?" he asked.

"All! Is it not enough?"

"It is too much to be passed over lightly. This matter ends not here. But for the present I will prove your words or——"

"Or what?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Revenge them!"

As the words fell from his lips, he turned and went with the staggering uncertain step of a drunken man through the orchard-paths and up to the old gray house—the home of his infancy and manhood, the home where honour and integrity and virtue had alone reigned for generations past, with no stain of evil or breath of shame to mar its spotless fame. Was she—the woman he deemed too pure and fair almost for mortal love to touch—was she to be the first to darken those stainless records? Belief in the story he had heard could not hold him yet, could not shake his fidelity or weaken his love, but a deadly fear crept into his aching heart, and ran like an ice-current through his veins. The poison of doubt had breathed upon his senses, and the plague-spot burned yet deeper and deeper with its torturing whispers. Once, in the agony that consumed him, he gazed up at the home he loved, and stretched his arms out to the vacant air.

"Oh my wife, my love!" he cried unconsciously, "let all the world perish, only let me know you *true!*"

It was the yearning, the idolatry of an intense engrossing passion that spoke in the words. To think that the loveliness he held in reverence so deep, the heart that had beat on his own, the lips that had breathed their kisses on his—that these were shamed, and vile, and dishonoured, was worse than death. If there was treachery and infidelity in her past or present, she was equally lost to him. She could no more be the spotless ideal of his life, that he knew. Then he passed through the rose-covered porch and stood in her presence.

CHAPTER V.

THE WRATH OF LOVE.

> To be wroth with those we love
> Doth work like madness in the brain.
>
> *Coleridge.*

She sat in the old tiled kitchen, her hands crossed listlessly on her lap, her face pale, her eyes heavy. The table was prepared for the evening meal, and flowers decorated the snowy cloth and gave colour and fragrance to the simple homely arrangements.

His eyes took in the whole quiet pretty scene—the clean blue-and-white tiled floor, the glitter of the brass pots and pans, the dusky walnut-wood presses, the old oak chairs and trestles, and above all, the quiet little figure leaning so listlessly back in her seat, with the spotless head-gear and blue kirtle of the picturesque Norman dress.

He stayed an instant on the threshold. As his step paused and his shadow fell, she started from her listless attitude. She went to meet him swiftly, her eyes shining welcome, her lips smiling, her face upraised for the kiss that never failed to greet her. But she met a look that drove the blood back to her heart with a deadly sickening fear. She cowered back, her arms fell to her side, her slight frame trembled, her bright girlish beauty changed into a shamed and shrinking semblance of the guilt he sought and the fear he dreaded. He looked at her in silence for a moment.

"Is this thing true?"

The words were few and stern, but they pierced to her heart with a terror she could not conceal. Her head drooped on her breast; she stretched out her hands to him in piteous appeal.

"Pierre, what have you heard? What do you mean?"

A sharp caustic laugh left his lips.

"You can ask *that*—your own words condemn you."

She looked at him with wide appealing eyes; her lips quivered like the lips of a grieved child.

"Indeed, indeed, you wrong me," she cried. "I have done nothing very faulty; I——"

The attempt at extenuation fired his whole soul with fury.

"Answer me," he cried, seizing her in his arms and gazing down at the pale, frightened, quivering face, with eyes whose passion and wrath struck fresh terror to her heart. "Answer me—you whom I loved, and deemed fairest, purest, truest among women—whom do you seek when you steal from my side at dead of night, like a thing of guilt and shame? Who is it you love so well that you risk reputation, honour, peace, for his sake? Oh heaven, that I should have to ask it! Oh love! Oh wife! say it is false; look in my face as you looked but a few short hours ago, and I will curse myself that my lips have wronged you by even the utterance of a doubt."

The wild impetuous words poured out their prayer unchecked, unstayed; but with all the agony she suffered, with all the yearning for his trust—his faith—that thrilled her to her heart's core, she could not yield to the prayer or answer the entreaty.

"Who has told you this?"

The pale lips, the shrinking form, were not those of innocence. A tempest of fury shook him once more.

"Is this all you say?" he cried in his torture. "Are you then what that woman called you—beautiful, seductive, tempting—a traitress to honour and to womanhood?"

"I am none of these," she flashed out

scornfully, stung by reproach so great, by calumny so vile.

"None! Then why not refute the charge? Why not answer what I ask? A word—but one word—is all I need. Have you stolen out at night and sailed down the river to meet some man—some lover, as I heard? Yes, or no? Nay, do not shrink; I will have the truth now if I track your paramour to his hidden lair and force it from him with my knife at his throat."

A change passed over her face and stole all its warmth and bloom, till it looked like the grayness of death. He saw it, and his voice rang out imploringly: "Oh my love, I frighten you; forgive me, you know I love you. You know the upraised voice of all the world would never make me believe ill of you. Why do you torture me so? A word, one little word, is all I need; a word you can utter so easily."

"Heaven help me, I cannot!"

The faint imploring cry broke from her

white lips involuntarily. She hid her face in her hands and burst into a passion of wild agonised weeping. He who loved her so, who would have cast the very shadow of grief or suffering from her path could he have willed it, looked down on her now with the mute despair of a broken heart, with the tearless agony of a shaken faith.

"You cannot. Are you then guilty ?"

"Of deceiving you—yes. Of aught else I am innocent."

His laughter rang out fierce and wild on the stillness.

"Of deceiving me! Oh, no! That is no sin! No wrong! Your lover has taught you to reason well."

"I have no lover," she moaned. "It is a lie."

"Whom do you go to meet then, like a thing of infamy, as they have called you?"

She was silent, while the glow of the fire-flames flickered over her white changed face, and showed him the pathetic misery of her imploring eyes.

"You will not say. Well then, I believe the worst. The woman who withholds a secret from her husband would count it a small thing to dishonour his name, his love, his rights. Your looks, your words, condemn you. You have had my love; you have smiled in my eyes; you have talked of a lifetime spent in the joy that has made this past week a very paradise; and now you have deceived and betrayed me!"

"If you think that," she cried, with the sudden anger and indignation of her outraged womanhood, "your love is little worth. If you can listen to the tongues of slander and believe such vileness as you have imputed, you are less worthy of my love than I of yours."

The fiery indignant words touched him with remorse.

"What secret is it, then, you withhold from me?" he pleaded. "Oh think, is not my love wide enough to forgive, my trust deep enough to shelter you from all consequences ? Is it some youthful folly, some girlish imprudence that has woven this mystery and secrecy about you ? Only tell me, Ninette; you do not know what I suffer ! "

The agony in his voice, the passion in his eyes, touched her more deeply than any reproach. She threw herself at his feet, the great salt tears blinding her gaze as it sought his face, and sought in vain for the love and trust of old.

"I do know," she moaned, "for I suffer too."

"Then tell me ; trust me."

"I *cannot.*"

Once more those fatal words ; once more that terrible despair which defied all entreaty, and admitted of but one interpretation. He laid his hands upon her shoulder with the grasp of a desperate man.

"To kill you were a crime ; yet heaven

knows it were a crime justified by the madness and the shame that is my portion henceforward."

The fire of jealousy scorched his heart as with a hot iron. The ferocity of an undisciplined race, stern of creed and rigid of honour, stirred and woke beneath this bitter provocation. The light of certainty showed him but one belief, to that he clung, though its agony maddened him. Before that cry of inability, before that silence of shame, his doubts grew surer, his faith fell as a tree whose roots the axe has severed.

"Go to him you shield," he cried wildly; "go and laugh together over the poor fool who once loved you; once, ay, once, but long ago, long ago! The woman I loved is *dead!*"

Then he released her, and without another look upon her face he went out from the house, ere his strength should fail him, ere his hands should be stained with the blood of the fair foul creature he had brought to his hearth and home in the fulness of a passionate joy, in the trust of a great love.

She lay where he had left her, in the glow of the wavering firelight. Tearless sobs shook her, a great dread numbed and froze the blood in her veins. The intense agony of those first few moments would have made unconsciousness a blessed relief, but it never came. Each sound, each sight, from the ticking of the clock to the stir of a leaf, or the rustle of a branch against the open casement, all came to her with a clear and painful distinctness. The coolness of the midsummer air deepened, the gray hues of twilight faded, then at last she rose and dragged her weary frame to that accustomed seat by the fire, and shivered in the warm golden glow as if the coldness of winter reigned around.

"He must let me tell," she moaned. "My oath cannot outlast such wrong and misery as this. But how to reach him now? Oh heavens, if I should be watched, tracked, discovered!"

She sat there motionless, her brain racked with the effort at invention of schemes and plans, each in its turn cast aside as futile. The serving girl came and cleared away the untasted meal, and spoke wonderingly to her, and asked if she needed aught, but she only shook her head and answered nothing.

To all external sounds and cares she seemed blind and deaf. The reaction that follows upon intense excitement was with her, and she lay in the dull heavy stupor of a misery so intense that it numbed her senses to all sentient life, and left her but the memory of suffering. The night deepened, the stars shone through the open casement, the hoot of an owl came wailing on the stillness. That sound reached her through the apathy that bound her senses. She rose to her feet and moved to the porch, and looked out with wide appealing eyes on the peaceful beauty of the summer night. All was intensely still.

The delicious coolness of the air as it swept over her aching brow brought the first sense of relief she had yet felt. A cluster of the rose foliage smote her as the wind stirred it; the quivering luminance of moon and stars lit up the whole quiet garden grounds; the far-off murmur of the flowing water broke in monotonous music against the motionless wheels of the mill.

As her gaze swept over the vast stretch of silent country, she heard a step on the path, a shadow fell across the silver lake which the moonbeams had made on the dewy sward.

"Are you looking for your husband, Mistress Leroux?" said a harsh voice in her ear. "You will never see him more—he has enlisted as a soldier, and marched with the troop yonder, an hour ago!"

CHAPTER VI.

FLED !

IN the ruined tower a man sat alone. Through the darkness the starlight shone. It fell on the bare cold walls, and lit up the gloomy recesses, while light misty vapours, soft and silvery as smoke-wreaths, floated in from the river, and dwelt shadow-like in every nook and corner. It was an eerie place enough. A place no man would dwell in from choice—a place to which its present occupant had been driven by the sternest law that rules human life—necessity.

Restlessly his eye roved from side to side through the vast desolate width of this legend-haunted hall. The bats' cold wings flapped against his forehead, the night-owls flew to and fro through its gloomy passages. Unspeakably dreary, unspeakably desolate, it seemed to him, who had a coward's shrinking fear, and a child's superstitious dread of darkness and loneliness like this. "Will she never come?" he said to himself again and again, as he listened in vain for the signal he longed to hear—for the plash of the oars in the river below, and the consciousness of a human presence to gladden, even for a few brief moments, his self-enforced solitude.

It was an hour past midnight. A fear of ill that had chanced, of discovery that threatened, fell upon his heart. Listening and watching, the minutes seemed long as hours, each filled with new dread, with ever-increasing fear. "If they have discovered her absence—followed her—oh heavens!" he muttered in his terror, while his eyes glared through the shadows with the fear of a hunted animal brought to bay, and desperate.

While the thought still held him, the familiar signal reached his ears. He started to his feet, and looked anxiously towards the window, then repeated it. Another instant and a girl's light figure swung itself through the aperture, and with deft soundless feet dropped safely down on the floor within.

"Ninette!" he cried joyfully, then trembled and turned pale, for with reeling steps and ashy face the girl came on through the black noiseless gloom, and then fell at his feet like one dead.

He bent over her, and a mortal terror shook his limbs, an icy fear seized his heart.

Senseless and still, like a fallen statue, she lay at his feet, with the cloud of her rich waving hair floating over her motionless limbs, shrouding her death-like face. He called her name, he chafed her cold hands, he dashed water on her face, he tried, with eyes in which tears stood thick, and hands which trembled and shook like the weakest woman's, to revive her senses, and recall life to the stricken form.

"Oh God! Not *this* life too!" he moaned, and the sound of his voice in that intense stillness seemed to him changed and fearful.

After awhile her senses returned; slow quivering breaths heaved her bosom and parted her lips; her eyes—wide with terror, dark with pain—opened on the frightened face above her. She knew it, and raised herself with sudden strength, and shuddered away from his touch as if it were hateful.

"Go, go!" she cried wildly. "Oh that you had never crossed my path!"

He looked at her in amazement, scared by the wild words, by the blazing eyes, the agony and reproach which thrilled her voice, and turned all its sweet rich music to discord.

"What has happened?" he faltered.

She rose and faced him in the gloom, with a despair and a passion in her face that awed him into shamed remorseful silence.

"What? Only this—that for your sake I have lost love, home, honour! Only this—that to keep my oath with you, I have sacrificed my husband's heart, perhaps his life! Oh heaven! In my own sight, at least, I stand to day his murderess."

"You are mad!" he gasped in his bewilderment. She laughed wildly.

"Mad! Well, perhaps I am. There are wrongs that turn youth to age, and reason to madness, they say. Such wrongs are mine. Do you know what he has said to-night? That I—I, his wife, have betrayed and deceived him—that I steal from his side in the midnight darkness to meet another lover. Do you hear? A lover. And I could hear *that* and say nothing."

"You did not confess?" The frightened voice, the terrified face recalled her to herself. She looked at him in mute scorn.

"Are you afraid of *that?* No, I confessed nothing."

He drew a long, deep breath of relief. "Thank God!" he muttered.

She turned fiercely on him. "That is all you say—all you think. It is not for his suffering—for my shame—that you care; and once I believed you loved me!"

"I do love you," he said earnestly.

"Yes, with a wavering selfish love that recks not of the ill it brings, or I endure. Oh hear me," she pleaded, passionately clasping his hands in her own, "hear me for once, and have pity! Release me from my oath, and let me tell him all. He will do you no harm for my sake. I will buy his release; I will follow him to the battlefield itself; I will seek him through the length and breadth of France, if you will only give me leave to confess all—to clear myself in his eyes for ever."

He looked at her, wrathful and desperate in his sudden anger.

"What you ask is madness," he said; "it would give one or other of us to certain death, and the guilt would be yours. Did you say he had joined the army—this rash hot-headed fool?"

"How dare you miscall him!" she flashed out wrathfully, "you—a coward and—" A warning look stopped her words.

"It is not for *you* to upbraid me," he said. "As for what you ask, it is impossible—doubly impossible now—since, by his rashness, your husband has placed himself in direct antagonism to me. I cannot afford to ruin myself for a woman's caprice. As I said before, the tie between us is too strong for you to break—the oath that binds you to serve me comes before your marriage vows." She looked him full in the eyes. In her own glowed the light of despair; the resolve of one fixed and determined on some course of action, who counts not the danger that lies in the path, and would perish in the attempt.

"You think so?" she questioned very calmly. "Well, I do not. Nevertheless, have no fear of me, I will not betray you. I came at peril of my own life to warn you now. I have been tracked here by a woman, vile of tongue and cruel of heart. If she suspects you, I know not. In any case this place is no longer safe." He started.

"And you have delayed thus?"

Her face flushed with scorn, her eyes surveyed him mockingly.

"Do you hear the pursuer's step already?" she asked.

"Do not play with me," he said with sudden fierceness. "If there is danger, say so."

"There is danger," she answered him calmly, "but we seek it henceforth *together*." He looked at her in amazement.

"What do you mean? Is this a time for jest?"

"Heaven knows it is not, neither have I

the will to attempt it. What I say I mean. I have no home," her voice quivered, "no shelter, no love to look for, save yours. You offered it once, and I refused it."

"But now, when shelter means danger, and protection death, you accept?" he said, in wonder.

"Even so."

"I thought I knew something of women," the man muttered, looking at her with doubtful and reluctant admiration. "I see I was wrong."

For an instant silence reigned between them.

Her face looked bloodless as marble, resolute as despair. The words she had just uttered had cost her more than it was in him to imagine.

"You mean it?" he asked her at length.

"Of a certainty I do," she answered wearily. "I have no home—I can never look in his face, nor touch his hand till my oath is absolved. I may as well share your peril as live here in a shame that will poison my whole future. *He* will never believe in me again." The mute despair, the utter hopelessness in her face and words, touched even his selfishness.

"It is a hard fate," he said slowly. "To lose all through me. Can you bear it?"

"After what I have borne to-day," she said with an irony that touched him to the quick, "you can ask that! I had to choose between you both, and chose—you!" He flushed from chin to brow, and remained mute with a shrinking hesitation that told of the struggle within.

"We go together then?" he asked faintly at last. She lifted her bowed head and looked at him—a shiver ran through her graceful limbs, and on her face glowed the martyrdom of despair.

"Yes."

A momentary joy quivered over the handsome womanish features of the man who had wronged and ensnared her.

"So best!" he said gaily. "Once we escape out of this cursed country, it will go hard with me if I do not win you such splendour and such happiness as you would never have found in yonder dreary hamlet."

She made no answer. In her heart she asked herself with bitter mockery:

"Gold; will that content, having lost love?"

Then through the chill damp gloom of the breaking dawn they crept like hunted guilty things to the boat that was moored beneath the ruined casements, and so floated on down the misty river to the new day and the new life beyond!

CHAPTER VII.

"LA GLOIRE!"

THE sound of war was throughout the land. France knew her peril and vainly strove against it. Nearer and nearer with every day came the foe; sterner, crueller, more desperate grew the warfare. From village and hamlet and town, the demand for recruits brought ever-fresh supplies; terror and war darkened many a home, crushed many a heart; everywhere was the sound of mourning, everywhere the dread of ill, close at hand and soon to fall.

Within a day's march of Paris, a troop of soldiers had halted and were gathered round a table in front of the *auberge* smoking, drinking, and chatting with the mercurial carelessness that generally characterises the sons of Mars.

"We shall be in to-morrow," said one.

"And warm work we shall have," muttered another.

"So much the better; you are not going to shirk it now, are you?"

"It is not of the work I think," the man answered sadly, "nor yet of myself—a man can die but once—but there are the wife and the little ones."

The words cast a shadow of gloom over many a careless face in the laughing group.

"True—for them it is bad," they murmured, and thought sadly of the quiet homes, and the rosy faces, and the pretty childish voices that might ask in vain for sight or sound of a soldier-father ere another sun had set.

One man stood aloof and apart from all, under the thick shrouding boughs of a great pear-tree. Now and then he looked at the group as they tossed off their wine, or laughed and joked with gay and airy buffoonery.

"They can enjoy!" he thought, and a bitter wonder and disdain crept into his heart, for life to him was so unspeakably sad and desolate a thing, that it seemed a marvel that those of lighter brains and hearts could find amusement or forgetfulness in such an hour as this.

"You are bad company to-night, Pierre," cried one of the soldiers. "Will you not join us? you may not have the chance much longer."

"So much the better for me," he said sternly, neither turning his gaze nor his step towards them.

"Have you fallen out with life already, or has your sweetheart jilted you?" laughed a young stalwart soldier with the down of manhood scarce grown on his chin, and a laughing boyish face that had left a sad blank in the home-circle from whence it had been drawn.

"My affairs are no concern of yours," was the somewhat fierce retort.

"*Dieu de dieu,* no. You take very good care no one else but yourself shall know aught of them," returned the other.

"Don't trouble Pierre," chimed in the voice of the man who had given him the invitation to join them. "*C'est un drôle, mais c'est un brave.*"

"He had need to be the one to make up for the other," muttered the young soldier. "A duller fellow I never came across."

"He has done good work, though, and his recklessness is something to marvel at. The other night he fought three Prussians, single-handed, and came off with scarce a scratch himself."

"*Ventre bleu* — has no one else ever done the same?"

"Doubtless; but this fellow is an untrained recruit, and has the fool-hardiness and coolness of perfect courage, and no more fear of fire or regard of danger than if he were bullet-proof. The Colonel thinks very highly of him."

"That means promotion."

"He doesn't want *that*—only danger."

"Yes—I've heard him ask for the most ticklish of the foraging parties: *pauvre diable!* there is something underneath it all. He carries a heavy heart under that bold brave face if I mistake not."

"He is *bon soldat* to the backbone. I hope the bullets won't whisk him off as quickly as he seems to desire. We can ill spare men now."

"Think you it will come to siege?"

"*Dieu de dieu*—yes. These cursed German brutes are hemming us in on every side."

The talk grew graver, the jests less boisterous, while the man whom they discussed stood motionless in the starlight, his musket resting against his shoulder, his eyes fixed on the far-off walls of the fair city so soon to be the prey of the foe.

The fearless dauntless soldier had been through many a hot skirmish, had served well, and learned quickly, and borne the arduous unremitting work of trying campaigns and close discipline, with a cool bravery that had brought him into notice, and won him both respect and liking from comrades and superiors.

They did not quite understand. They could not comprehend his moods of silence—his strange unsocial gravity—his utter reticence respecting his own past life, of which no one knew or could ascertain anything.

It held some mystery, some sorrow, *that* they surmised; but of its nature he never spoke, and after a time they ceased to inquire. The noise, and clang, and tumult of war, the ever-present excitement of danger, all these were too constantly around and about them to allow of much leisure for speculation or gossip. They accepted him among the fraternity as one whom they could trust, honour, and respect, even if no warmer feeling were permitted, and for *that* he was alone to blame, since he allowed of no closer approach to confidence or regard than he himself sought, and that was as little as well might be without absolute offence.

Times were terrible now in France. The war fever was at its height. Men grew drunk with bloodshed as with wine. Fiercest hatred to the conqueror glowed in every breast, and each day the hopes of victory grew fainter, the dread of conquest sharper. And amidst all the turmoil, and anxiety, and danger, one man moved as though he bore a charmed life, only saying to himself: "Oh that death were possible!"

But though near often, it yet passed him by, taking, with that strange fatality that makes life at once so striking and so sad, lives beside him, around him—

lives loved, happy, young, hopeful—and yet leaving his unharmed, to bear the burden of a hidden woe that haunted every hour of his existence.

A life of hardship, discipline, suffering, was his daily portion, but for all external discomfort he cared but little, scarce felt or noticed it. Hunger, weariness, coarse food, ceaseless toil, terrible danger, all these looked but trifles to eyes that had grown blind with one hour's shattered bliss, with the agony of a doubt that had turned love to madness.

But the war-fire awoke in him at last and became the one thing that kept him from utter despair. Severe campaigning, hot skirmishes, and incessant watchfulness, all the demands on his time and attention that each day rendered more necessary, these brought him excitement, and gave him the utter disregard and recklessness as to life and danger that awoke the involuntary admiration of his comrades.

Pierre Leroux was a man with the born instincts of a soldier, and his previous quiet uneventful life in no way unfitted him for his present experiences. Its necessities called many latent faculties into play, and taught him the two greatest lessons of life—patience and endurance; and this man, who but a few months before had known no greater anxiety than the failure of a crop or the drought of a season, now bore privations as calmly, and risked death as recklessly, as the hardiest soldier who had spent a lifetime in the service of war and the toil of camps.

To-night, when the carousal was over, and the soldiers slept for the few brief hours that were alone permitted, he stood as sentinel over the little troop.

The air was chilly—there was no light, for moon and stars were shrouded by gray heavy clouds. With ears alert, and eyes keen and sharp as long habit could make them, he paced to and fro in that ceaseless monotonous round that is so wearisome even to the trained soldier. The darkness deepened, and the wind grew fiercer. Into his brain stole the thoughts that could still so incessantly torture and perplex him. Into his heart came the memory of that night when the woman he loved had crouched at his feet, and with the pallor of guilt on her face and yet the denial of guilt on her lips, had prayed him to believe her innocent. Innocent! He almost laughed as he thought of it. A week-old wife would not steal away through the midnight shadows to the presence of any living man, who was not beloved by her—would not leave her husband's side and risk the interpretation that could not fail to be put on her doing so, without some terribly strong motive.

And yet now, in the stillness and silence, and with the shadow of close peril beside him, he knew he loved her as fiercely, adoringly, passionately as ever. He could not forget or banish the remembrance that haunted him. The fever-mists of pain that blinded his senses to every hardship and his eyes to every peril, were yet not deep enough or dense enough to blind them to this one memory, to cover with oblivion this one love.

As he paced to and fro in that monotonous march, he bent his head, and a low groan of intense suffering escaped his lips.

"To forget!" he implored. "Oh God! for only one hour to forget!"

In that instant all thought of duty escaped him, the vigilant eyes no longer swept the horizon, the keen ears grew deaf to all but the dull agonised beating of a heart that felt it would never again find rest or peace on the earth's wide face. Suddenly he started and looked round. Alas for that trance of pain, that short forgetfulness! The dull thud of horses' feet came loud and distinct to his ears—in the shadow-play of night and dawn he saw the flash of arms, and while his alarum rang clarion-clear throughout the slumbering camp, he knew how vain the warning was.

In an instant all was stir, bustle, confusion.

With marvellous celerity the troop got under arms, but their actions were not rapid enough for the charging sweep of the foe, who trebled their scanty numbers, and bore down on them with an eagle's swoop.

The hoofs of rearing chargers struck at them on every side, the clash of swords and crash of shot and steel filled all the air. It was a conflict sharp and short, a conflict hand to hand, breast to breast, over which the morning broke gray, and silvery, and beautiful, as though in mockery of the brute passions and murderous follies of men.

The struggle was brief. Outnumbered six to one, there was little doubt how it must end. Escape or victory were alike impossible. The Prussians were victors ere the day was an hour old.

The prisoners of war—humiliated, disarmed, furious as trapped beasts—were handed over to a detachment of the Prussian corps. Their ultimate fate was not yet decided upon. The victory of Sedan had led to its evacuation, and the Bavarian and Prussian corps were marching rapidly towards Paris. The conquerors were exultant—the fate of war seemed certain now. All Paris was in revolt, confusion and excitement reigned everywhere. In military circles but one issue seemed possible, and though "*Guerre à outrance*" was still in every Frenchman's mouth, the German armies treated it as a mere question of time.

The improvised and Republican armies of France, drawn from all sources, and in many cases untrained and undisciplined, might certainly convert the war of arms into one of siege, but with Metz and Sedan in their hands, and the flower of the French army either killed or prisoners, the Prussians might well be confident, and treat their enemy's defiance as mere bravado.

Pierre Leroux had been severely wounded. Unconscious of all that was passing around him, he lay throughout the long weary day. Pain held him powerless, his strong frame lay bruised and stricken, his eyes were closed, as if lead weighed down their lids. Unfamiliar voices sounded in his ears, but he had no consciousness of their words. Weak with loss of blood, dizzy and faint with the exhaustion of long fasting and incessant fatigue, so he lay, wondering dimly if death was at hand now—the death he had prayed for so long.

If his captors had been as merciless as he desired, another dawn would never have greeted his earthly sight; but with a certain rough kindness and compassion they had tended his wounds, and when consciousness returned, and fever at last left him, he found himself in an ambulance waggon, in a part of the country totally new and strange to him.

With sense and feeling came back the remembrance of his fate. He was a prisoner. Doubtless his captors were about to take him to their own land; stray words he caught here and there, all seemed to point to this as conclusive. He glanced round the straw-lined vehicle as it jolted over the rough uneven roads. Four other figures were stretched there like himself. Now and then a moan of pain escaped them. One he recognised as the gay young soldier who had laughed and jested at the wine tavern the evening before that sharp and short encounter with the enemy, whose results had been so disastrous.

"It is you then, Poupard, is it?" he said languidly. "Are you hurt?"

"Should I be here else?" grunted the

other ungraciously. "Devil take these brutes, they have crushed every bone in my body, I verily believe."

"How was it?" Pierre asked languidly.

"It was one of their horses; the hoofs struck me down. I was dragged out from under the animal afterwards, so they say. A shot had killed him, and he fell on me. *Dame!* why did he not kill me outright? 'Twould be better than to be maimed for life, as I assuredly shall be now."

Pierre sighed wearily. Perhaps he thought there were worse things to endure even than to be maimed for life.

"Are they taking us to their own cursed country, think you?" demanded Poupard presently.

"I cannot say. I do not even remember how long I have been here. It seems an age since that skirmish."

"'Tis but a day and a night; and, by the way, that reminds me—how came it you were so late in giving the alarm? Our captain is furious. He blames the whole disaster to you."

Pierre's face flushed deeply beneath its pallor of pain.

"Is that true?" he said fiercely.

"*Mon Dieu!* Yes. Have you ever known me lie?"

"I gave the warning instantly. They seem to have stolen up like shadows. I cannot tell how they came so suddenly and quickly."

"They are in league with the fiend himself, I believe," growled the other ferociously. "Will their luck never end?"

"It seems not."

"And we so near Paris," continued Poupard disconsolately, "but a day's march, and they will be looking out for us. *Hein!* but it is hard."

"The fortune of war," murmured Pierre. "Our turn may come yet."

"There is a chance of escape perhaps," whispered Poupard restlessly; "they are all so *sure,* it might be easy to surprise them one night. Where are the others?"

"I do not know. Hush, here comes a trooper!"

"Lay your plans more cautiously, messieurs," said a voice beside them, the voice of the Uhlan whose approach they had noticed; "we understand French as well as you, here."

Consternation depicted itself on Poupard's face. From that time he lay silently on his straw, meditating his plans in his own mind, and more convinced than ever that his foes were in league with the powers of darkness, since actions, movements, and language were alike known to them. He wondered if his thoughts even escaped that secret *espionage.*

As days passed on, however, the wild plans of escape which he had formed grew more apparently hopeless. Food was scanty, his wounds and bruises tormented him more and more. The way was long, the weather terrible. Hardships and privations weakened his frame and damped his ardour. He was separated from his companions after those rash overheard words, and in silence and solitude he suffered now, till courage forsook and misery crushed him.

"I shall die soon," he said to himself, and his words seemed as if they were to be speedily verified.

He and Pierre Leroux were in the hospital ward together—a dismal enough place, extemporised from sheer necessity, as many of the soldiers were too prostrated by hunger, and fever, and wounds, to proceed any farther.

Gentle-voiced women, some highly-born and delicately nurtured, flitted to and fro those dreary wards—ministering angels to the poor broken-spirited sufferers, whom they tended with untiring patience.

One morning one of the sisterhood came quietly up to Pierre's side as he lay weak and feverish on his narrow bed. "Your friend died last night," she said gently. "He bade me give you this letter, with a request that if ever opportunity offers, you will deliver it to his mother. He was from your own part of Normandy, I believe."

Pierre took the letter from her hand in silence, then turned his face to the wall and sighed.

"Even *he* dies," he cried, in the depths of his desolate heart, "shall I, to whom life is hateful, alone be spared?"

CHAPTER VIII.

WRONGED.

In the millhouse the old Norman woman, Mère Leroux, sat alone, and watched in vain for the return of the son she loved, or the fair girlish form that had been wont to flit to and fro through the old dusky chambers and the quiet orchard paths.

For her, life had always been a monotonous uneventful thing, coloured by no romance, disturbed by no storm; a routine of labour made up of simple homely cares—sewing, darning, spinning; a day's work in the cornfields at harvest-time; a weekly journey to the market-place; a thrifty care of her household; a watchful heed of the fruits, and flowers, and eggs, and vegetables that went to be sold in the neighbouring town in their respective seasons. Her son had been very dear to her, as all only children, and especially only sons, are to their mothers. When he was fourteen his father died, and from that day he had been to the little brown-faced woman as her sole earthly idol—her one treasure. All her care and thought were for him. In her sight he could do no wrong; his life had been pure, simple, unchangeful as her own, and now——

Ah! now she could only sit in the chimney-corner spinning her flax, and telling her beads, and listening eagerly and untiringly for the firm bold tread she loved so well, and which never came.

A little old olive-skinned woman of seventy years, with a wrinkled face and a high, winged cap, and restless eyes that ever and always glanced at the open door, as if in search of something they never saw.

What was she to anyone? But in her there was a fidelity that never wavered; an honesty that never paltered with wrong, but scorned it for the thing it was; and a curious far-seeing judgment that had shamed and silenced Rose Michel's slanderous tongue when she sought her with the gossip of the village fresh on her lips.

"Listen," she said, "I am an old woman, and not over-wise, so they say, but I know this: the girl loved Pierre as well as he loved her—I know it. She has in no way wronged him. He is my son—my all. I love him better than anything else; so did she. Could I do aught that would pain him, think you? No! Well, and she could not either. Some evil has come between them. He is so good, and she—she loved him. Some day it will all come right. The young you see are not over-patient; it is only the old who know how to wait." And then she span on again, and would listen to no more; and Rose

Michel and other gossips slank away from her presence, abashed by a faith they could not shake, and a love they could not fathom.

But evil things were told and believed of the girl-wife who had fled from her husband's home and driven him out to the warfare that was devastating the land, and widowing hearth and home in every quiet village as well as in every populous town.

The story of Rose Michel lost nothing by repetition. It was sweet to the gossipers, who had hated Ninette for her radiant beauty and her graceful girlish ways. It was received by young and old alike with an avidity only second to the expression of entire belief in its truth, and had Ninette appeared in her old home there would not have been one friendly voice to give her welcome—one face to smile on her again.

But she never came.

How, or why, or where she had fled, none knew, though rumour invented a hundred different tales on the subject, each equally removed from the truth. Meanwhile, Pierre Leroux lay ill and helpless in the hospital ward at Metz, and the old, simple-minded, faithful woman ordered the household and attended to his mill and his crops as best she could, and spun on untiringly in her nook in the deserted kitchen, waiting always for a step that never came—for a voice that never greeted her.

It was well that she did not know he was a prisoner in the hands of the enemy. Had she done so she would have run all risks, and with her bundle slung across her back and her wooden shoes on her feet, have tramped untiringly through the country far and wide, until she reached his side, there to nurse and tend him back to health. But of his fate she was in total ignorance, for scant news ever reached that quiet little village, and though terrible events were happening and the fate of a whole nation was at issue, they spun and hoed and drove their cattle and reaped their harvests, and imagined every soldier, son, and lover a hero, and looked for his triumphant return with the rising of every sun that ushered in a new day's birth.

The whole town of Berlin was en fête.

News of a great victory had been telegraphed. The fate of the war seemed to have declared itself in favour of the Fatherland. Illuminations and rejoicings made the city gay and festive, as it had long not been. Bursts of music sounded ever on the air. The "Wacht am Rhein" and "Nun danket alle Gott," arose loud and clear in thanksgiving strains for the victory that had been so prodigal of great and glorious results.

In a small room in one of the quietest streets a girl was sitting, crouched by the stove, with her hands clasped tight over her ears, as if to shut out the triumphant riot of the populace without—the deafening clash of ringing bells and beat of drums, and glad gay strains of music which filled the autumn night. The door opened suddenly, and a man entered—his step light, his face radiant.

"What, Ninette, moping there and all the city so gay!" he exclaimed. "Now, put on your cloak and come out with me. It is a sight to do one's heart good—it will cheer you to see some fun for once." The girl raised her drooping head and looked at him with quiet scorn.

"You can see it and be glad?" she asked him as if in wonder. "Well, I have not yet learnt to forget that French blood runs in my veins—that it is the death of my countrymen this victory celebrates."

"Pooh! you ought to have forgotten all that by this time," he laughed carelessly; "what is the use of lamenting over such things? France has had her day—I knew it, and——"

"Deserted her cause when she had most

need of all her sons," the girl interrupted with quiet scorn.

His face glowed with sudden anger.

"It is not for you to taunt me with that," he said fiercely; "have you forgotten——"

"I forget nothing," she said wearily, "I wish I could. If I had your memory I might also have your capability of enjoyment. At present I have neither."

"You surely are not foolish enough to regret already?" he questioned with growing impatience. "Heavens! what do women want? I took you from that dismal hole where you were buried alive. At infinite risk I reached the Prussian forces, made use of the opportunities I discovered, and the information I was able to bestow, and now here we are, settled in peace and comfort and safety. You are in a far better position than ever you could have been as the wife of a Norman miller, and yet——"

"And yet repent and regret! Is not that what you were about to say?"

"It is. What the deuce you want I cannot imagine."

"I suppose not. I should think the day when you can understand my feelings, or realise that treachery and safety are not synonymous terms in *my* mind, must be very far away indeed."

"Where do you pick up your fine speeches?" he sneered. "Did that giant-limbed boor whom you fooled so prettily bestow some of his learning upon you? You are an apt pupil, I must say."

"I thought his name was not to be mentioned between us," she cried fiercely.

He laughed.

"If you keep to your part of the bargain, my pretty one, I will do the same."

She rose from her seat, and faced him with a certain proud disdain that was altogether new to her.

"If you would only enjoy yourself in

your own way, and leave me in peace!" she cried.

"Can you not understand that my way of enjoyment must necessarily be yours also —now?"

She was silent.

For a moment he surveyed her, half-proudly, half-compassionately, as she stood there before him with downcast eyes and the dim light of the lamp shed on her bright soft hair, which was no longer hidden by the peasant's cap of old.

"You might be happy enough, if you chose," he resumed, seeing she still remained speechless. "Bad as times are, I can still make enough to keep you as a lady—you have all the grace and airs of one, the part is easy to play. Now, will you be reasonable for once? I never yet have tried to force your inclinations—that you must allow. Remain here and receive my friends to-night. Our relationship need not be known unless you choose. Say you are my niece, sister, cousin—what you will. Are you willing?"

"For what purpose?" she asked him suddenly.

"For no harm, you may be sure. It is so dull, so foolish, the life you lead—moping there in your chamber yonder, growing pale, thin, melancholy, and all for what? A dream—a shadow—a thing without substance. I confess I cannot understand you."

"I suppose not."

"A thousand regrets will not undo the past," he continued mercilessly. "You do not suppose you could ever go back to him now?" She flushed from chin to brow at the words. Even though she knew their truth, she hated him for uttering them.

"I know it."

"You were more sinned against than sinning," he resumed more gently, "that I acknowledge. I drew you into my net, and now, say or do what you choose, you cannot break from its entanglements or go back to the old life again. Make the best of a bad bargain, then. It is too late to alter anything—what is done is done."

"Tell me what you want," she cried passionately, "and leave me."

"That is not polite, Ninette. For two months past I have been trying to train you to gentler speech and quieter manners. Have you profited no better by my lessons than this?"

She turned away in silence. "Stay," he cried, "perhaps I have annoyed you, troubled you. Be friends once more. Promise to come down to-night."

"I wonder you stoop to entreat what you know you can enforce," she said listlessly. "If you desire it I must obey."

"That is well," he said, with a smile of relief. "I would rather not *insist*, it is so much pleasanter for both to see you yield to persuasion than to force. And, Ninette, stay yet a moment. Put on that white gown I gave you and those bands of dead gold; it suits your style. And if for once you would try to look more cheerful and less like a victim about to be sacrificed, I should feel grateful for the effort."

"Have you any more—orders?"

"Dear child—not orders? Pray do not miscall my hints thus. Merely directions for your guidance. Surely a father is privileged to give them to his child!"

"Most certainly," she said, with a smile whose listlessness and pain gave neither brightness nor relief to her young sad face. "Only it is not always easy to remember that you are my—father."

"I have been neglectful, that is true, but I will make amends for all now. My only and unceasing regret is that I did not come in time to prevent your marriage with that Norman lout. To think that I who have some of the best blood of France in my veins should be allied to a mere son of the soil. Bah! it is monstrous."

"I should not advise you to boast of your French blood overmuch," the girl said with bitter scorn. "At least the son of the soil whom you despise so much has not forfeited honour, esteem, respect, as you have done. Not all the gold of the universe would have tempted him to betray his country."

"If his country had behaved as badly to him as it did to me, I think he would have needed little temptation to act in the same manner," was the angry retort. "And a mere stroke of diplomacy, Ninette, does not deserve so harsh a title."

"My peasant education is likely to blame in that I see only one face to the matter," she answered with deep contempt. "I cannot understand subterfuges. To me deceit is deceit, betrayal is betrayal. If those plans of yours which I accidentally discovered——"

"Will you be silent, girl?" he thundered, with wrath in his face and voice. She smiled bitterly.

"You have a weak point too, then. Well, be more sparing in the future of mine."

Two hours after a very different scene was being enacted in the same room. A group of men of all ages were seated round a card-table, playing with the zest and eagerness of habitual gamblers. Standing behind the chair of their host, her loveliness heightened by the difference of dress, her face flushed with the excitement of the scene before her, was Ninette.

Many of the group played less skilfully and cautiously than was their wont, distracted by the wonderful beauty of the girl, by her repartees, her cool disdain, her utter disregard of the admiration she excited. From time to time she served them with wines at a signal from her father, and the more they drank the wilder grew the play, the greater the vivacity and *abandon* of the players. A greater licence, a steadier tendency to *équivoques* and jests crept into the conversation, which showed scant respect for either their host or his daughter; but the one played on, smiled serenely and jested gaily, and the other scarce noticed or understood the allusions and innuendoes which grew broader and more plentiful as the night drew on. Two hours passed rapidly by, leaving their host a winner of heavy sums. He played very skilfully, with the proficiency of one accustomed to control chance by rules and trained skill, and yet with the outward listlessness and indifference of a professed gamester. His stakes were the largest of any, his luck the most remarkable, and when at last they rose from the table a certain colonel of the Prussian Guards congratulated him a trifle maliciously on the fact.

He shook his head with a deprecating smile. "Fortune is mine to-day—she will be yours to-morrow," he said. "Will you take your revenge then?"

"Assuredly," said the Colonel. "Meanwhile, if your Hebe will favour me with some more of that iced Moselle I will not decline it. Play is hot work, and this room is none of the coolest."

"Ninette," called her father.

She turned towards him carelessly.

"Nay, do not trouble her," pleaded the Colonel; "I will help myself." And ere the girl could ascertain her father's wishes, he was bending to her with the courtesy and flattery of a soldier and a gentleman, and whispering words that brought the colour to her cheeks in a sudden hot flame of wrath and wonder.

Such language was altogether strange to her, but she disliked it none the less. Her eyes glanced restlessly from face to face—in all she read the bold, fierce, lawless admiration that is at once an insult and a terror to a young and innocent woman. She left them and crossed rapidly over to her father's side.

"This is no place for me," she said in cold steady tones, that gave no sign of the shame and anger burning in her bosom. "Attend to your guests yourself, until they learn to treat a woman with some courtesy and respect." And with no leave-taking—without even so much as a bow of farewell—she passed from the room.

The men looked at each other in surprise, then laughed aloud. "Your wild bird needs taming, Mons. Monprât," said one.

"Is she scared in reality, or is it only a little piece of acting, got up for effect, and certain of leaving an impression behind—if only for its novelty?" asked another.

"Doubtless she is as sorry to go as we are to lose her," chimed in a third; "but she knows the true art of her sex's success—never to give too much of their company. To regret is better a thousand times than to be bored."

"My daughter is not accustomed to

society, gentlemen," interposed the voice of Léon Monprât. "That fact must plead her excuse."

"No need to tell us *that,* my good friend," was the supercilious rejoinder. "The fact was self-evident. What made you introduce her here to-night?"

"It was her own desire, but she is shy and unused to compliment and badinage. I fear you alarmed her."

"She looked quite fierce," laughed the officer. "You must teach her better manners for the future. A beautiful woman is all very well, but when she shows the lion's claws that is a different matter altogether."

Léon Monprât bit his lip, and an angry frown shadowed his brow. Greatly as he had wronged this girl, he yet pitied, and in his own fashion loved her, and he did not care that her name should be thus lightly and coarsely spoken of by men to whom a woman's reputation was as a thistle-ball with which the wind sports on a summer's day. With the skill of one well-accustomed to fence with the weapon of speech, he turned off the conversation to other topics, and shortly after his guests all left, the Colonel alone pausing at the door to say meaningly:

"Let your beautiful fury appear again to-morrow, friend Léon—she interests me."

Léon Monprât smiled and promised, but when he was alone his face grew dark with passion.

"Interests him, does she?" he muttered between his close-set teeth; "so much the worse for him. If she will play her cards as I wish the game is won. But will she?"

The question remained unanswered, for even in his own mind he knew there were deeds to which he could not bend, and threats with which he could not intimidate her. There had been times when, even as he had tortured, he had feared her, and remembering how his treachery had tainted her whole life with its poison, he half pitied her for the fate his own selfishness had wrought out.

He stood there, long debating in his own mind the possibility of carrying out a plan he had formed.

"She *has* loved," he thought, "and fear she does not know. Is there any passion on whose weakness I can play?"

And with the baseness of that thought there came no pity, for selfishness and cowardice ruled this man as with a rod of iron. Yet in his inmost heart he half envied her that virtue of fearlessness which he had never had, and never could possess.

CHAPTER IX.

TO MEET AGAIN.

A STRANGE and curious change had come over Ninette.

The listless apathy and weary patience of her manner had been converted into a feverish restlessness, a desire for gaiety, a hatred for the solitude which a short time before she had so earnestly coveted. It pleased her father to note it, looking as he did merely at the surface of the change, not at the cause. For seventeen years of her life he had neglected, and almost deserted her, then, when he had seen her in her fresh young beauty, he made her but the tool of his safety—the victim of his designs.

Long years before, when the mother had been fair, and young, and innocent, as the daughter was now, he had wedded her in a moment of infatuation which he had never ceased to regret. He had loved her well for a time, but then he wearied of the tie that bound him. Without a feeling of remorse he had forsaken her, and she in her agony and suffering had only dragged herself back to the home of her childhood and died, knowing nothing of his fate. He heard of her death, and heard too of the child she had left to the charity of strangers, and yet neither sought her nor took heed of her welfare till necessity compelled him. An adventurer, an agitator, a spy—all these he had been by turns, but to serve his purpose he had represented himself to his daughter as a martyr for the sake of freedom—a hero oppressed and wronged by the haters of liberty. For a time she believed him—only for a time. The mask soon fell off from his face, and she knew him for what he was—a traitor to his country, a spy in the service of the foe who were filling the length and breadth of the land with misery, bloodshed, and woe!

Bound to him by a tie too close to break—seeing that a word from her would have delivered him into her husband's hands to die a traitor's death—she had sworn, as he bade her, an oath to conceal and aid him as long as it lay in her power. He ruled her by two things—her weakness and her love. He promised she might live in peace and safety with Pierre Leroux, so long as she betrayed nothing of his existence or his treachery. But when concealment was at an end, when she saw the pitfall she had digged for her own feet, a great terror seized her. In the passionate scorn with which Pierre had spoken of the fugitive deserter she seemed to read his fate. She thought her husband would in common honour, and in furious contempt for the coward, think nothing of yielding him up to justice. She had no choice left but to shield him, and thereby she made herself his slave from that day forward; for to a man skilled in diplomacy, intrigue, and craft, she was an easy prey. Her life now was fettered by his will, darkened by his falsehoods. His own evil fame alone sufficed to tarnish her reputation, and from the men who were his associates she received scant courtesy, though her beauty won for her notoriety with speedy success.

As time passed on she grew hardened, reckless, defiant. She saw herself abandoned by love—outlawed for no cause—misjudged, condemned on all sides, and seeing it, she laughed with scorn at her own blindness, and drank the cup of humiliation to the last dregs.

Of late she gave no confidence to her father—betrayed nothing of the shame that consumed and the misery that held her.

She came at his bidding, and profited enough by his lessons to rule the men who surrounded her; to enslave, coquet, allure them, so that they might fall readier victims to the snares he spread. He deemed her content with her life at last—a passive agent in his hands. He lavished gifts upon her; he would have her robed in costly dresses and decked with jewels until her loveliness made all men wonder, and while she smiled, and jested, and coquetted with the heedlessness that was only scorn, and the caprice that was only bitterness, he looked on and was well content, and thought her the same.

He did not see her in her hours of solitude, when she took off her rich raiment and dashed her jewels on the floor, and drew forth from their hiding-place the peasant dress and the wooden shoes of old, weeping over them as a mother weeps over the tiny garments or broken toys of her dead child.

He had thought to buy forgetfulness for her with gold. It is a mistake men often make.

It seemed to her that all love, peace, content, had died out of her life for ever. Her heart felt chill and cold to every emotion of pain or joy alike. Her one brief dream of gladness was over, severed sharply as by a sword—killed utterly, and for ever.

Days might come and go, suns would rise, and nights would fall, and the great stars would throb in the skies, and gleam over the peaceful pastures and the flowing waters of her old home; but never more would she stand there and look out at these things with the thankful heart and trembling joy she had once known; never more would her life be one with the love she had lost, and the tenderness she had betrayed. So she told herself, and there was no voice to say her nay, and no living thing to speak of consolation.

It was a brilliant day, cold but fine—the sky without cloud, the sun without shadow on its brightness. The whole city was alive with tumult and excitement, for large numbers of returning troops were to march through with their prisoners of war and trophies of victory, and all were eager to greet and gaze upon the returning heroes.

In an open carriage placed at their service by one of the most ardent admirers of Ninette (and most reckless followers of fortune as represented by baccarat and napoleon) sat Léon Monprât and his daughter. She was exquisitely dressed in rich soft velvets and furs, which made her delicate beauty fairer and more piquant by contrast. But on her face was the shadow of an unspeakable pain, a dread that had never left her since the moment when she learnt this was no mere review of troops, as she at first had supposed, but a triumphant entry of the Prussian corps with their disarmed and humiliated prisoners.

Ere long the air was rent with thunders of welcome. The music of military bands rang out in riotous glee. The sound of drums, the rattle of musketry, the clash of bells, all gave their tribute in one mighty tempest of greeting.

Ninette turned deadly pale and leant back amidst the soft cushions of the carriage. She saw a great gathering mass of figures marching steadily towards her. She saw the flutter of the standards, the colours of torn and tossing flags, the gleam of musket and carbine barrels, the swarthy faces of the men, the arched glossy necks of the curveting chargers, the hues of brilliant uniforms, all the great vast sea of moving colour that flashed and fused itself before her wondering eyes with the background of that clear blue sky—the glittering warmth of the golden sunshine. She drew a deep gasping breath. It was a sight altogether new, wonderful, bewildering.

Louder and more deafening grew the cheers; clearer rang the wild rich music of the bells; more exhilarating sounded the merry rataplan of drums and the glorious strains of the national war-song. The folds of the torn battle-flags fluttered in the breeze; men and women laughed and wept like children as the squadrons passed rapidly by.

Suddenly, a great cry fell across the tumult—a cry whose agony and remorse startled all within hearing—a cry that reached to the passing troop, who, with down-bent heads, and shamed and bitter hearts, marched in the rear of their conquerors.

One man turned his weary gaze in the direction whence it came. He saw a woman's face with wild despairing eyes, that held his own fixed and electrified in their incredulous amazement, and their agonised dread. Then he was swept onwards with the impetuous advance of that marching force, while his heart seemed to stand still with the agony of that discovery and the horrors that it revealed.

"Ninette—Ninette! what was it?" implored Léon Monprât, as she fell back in the carriage shaking and ghastly, as though she had seen the dead return to life. A wild hysterical laugh burst from her lips. The anguish that assailed her strength was more than she could bear.

"What was it?" she echoed in a voice harsh and strange as madness. "Only a face—my husband's face! And I thought the world wide enough to keep *us*—apart!"

CHAPTER X.

THE BRIBE OF HONOUR.

His givings out were of an infinite distance
From his true-meant design.
Shakespeare.

THAT night, when play was wildest and stakes were at their highest, Ninette sat alone and apart. A hectic excitement shone in her face and lit her eyes with a brilliance almost painful.

"How silent you are to-night, *ma belle,*" said the colonel of the Prussian Guards as he leant back in his chair, and for a moment took his attention from the game to bestow it on her. She started, and looked appealingly at him.

"Can you stay a moment, after the others are gone?" she whispered eagerly. "I would speak with you." A glance of surprise flashed from his eyes. Then he bowed, and turned back to resume the game with a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

"I have but one complaint against women," he murmured to himself. "They are too easily won. Even this girl, who promised more excitement than usual, is not one whit more difficult of conquest than the rest."

The night went on. The play grew wilder, broken only by intervals when cool drinks and sparkling wines were passed round. It was a sad enough scene for a woman's eyes to gaze upon—this fever of madness, this whirl of gambling, and bitterness of heart-burning, and stir of restless passions, roused by an excitement false and deadly. It was very late ere the play ceased, leaving Léon Monprât for once a considerable loser. Most of the men had left. The Prussian colonel lingered behind, and at a sign from Ninette her father muttered some hasty excuse and quitted the room. The girl turned hurriedly, eagerly, towards her companion.

"Pardon me, monsieur, for my boldness, but I have a question to ask," she began. He bowed low.

"I am at mademoiselle's service," he said quietly, while a light of triumph shone in his eyes. She moved restlessly away to where the gray light of the dawn fell through the windows, and stood there for an instant silent.

"Can you tell me," she said nervously, "what will be done with the prisoners of war who have been sent hither?" He looked at her in astonishment.

"Does that interest you?" he said. "They will remain in the garrison until the conclusion of the war."

"And then——"

"Then, of course, be ransomed or sent

back, according to the terms of the treaty." She drew a deep breath.

"They are—they will be kindly used?" she stammered. He laughed aloud.

"*Mein Gott*—yes! Far better than they deserve, the insolent braggarts. But why all these questions, pretty one? You have no lover among them I hope?" She grew very pale.

"No," she answered coldly, "but they are my countrymen—some of them—and—I am sorry for them."

"Be as sorry as you please," he said, drawing nearer to her, and speaking more tenderly as his eyes took in the perfect beauty and grace of the drooping figure that leant so listlessly against the shuttered windows. "Be as sorry as you please, but do not forget others for their sake. Can only your countrymen claim a thought of tenderness from that gentle heart?" She drew back, and looked at him with haughty defiance.

"I have no tenderness. You misjudge me if you think so."

"Nay," he laughed, with soft amusement. "Your eyes belie your words—they tell your secrets better than you are aware of. There is someone you have cared for, or do care for now, among those men?"

"That is none of your business." His amusement increased.

"You can be fierce too," he said. "Well, I don't know but that I like you better in that mood. Even-tempered women bore one so soon. Now, tell me, what is it you want of me? Have you some special friend among those prisoners that you are interested in? Do you wish my aid? It is at your service." She flushed all over her delicate face.

"Oh, if you would—if you would!" she cried eagerly, "only see that he is not harshly treated, that he does not suffer; he looks so ill—so ill. Oh, will you do this for me?"

"You have not told me his name yet."

"Pierre Leroux. A young Norman."

"Ah! and he was your lover once, then?"

"Have I not told you I am nothing to him—nothing? I ask you to serve him because I—well, because he has been basely wronged, cruelly treated. I knew him once, as you say, and I am sorry for him. That is all."

"That is all," he repeated, with a mocking smile. "And enough truly. I would give a good deal for such interest from you, *ma belle!*"

Her face darkened with anger.

"I have asked you too much," she said coldly. "I forgot that disinterested service is a thing rarely rendered by a man to a woman."

"I will render you any service you please while I can," he said gently. "I am not here for long. I was invalided, but now, since I have recovered, I go back to the frontier with the troops who came to-day; but I will ascertain the whereabouts of this—friend, and let you know of his welfare."

She caught his hands in hers with sudden passionate gratitude. "May Heaven bless you!" she said tearfully. "And one thing more, you will not mention my name—ever!"

"Why not?"

"I wish it." He smiled amusedly.

"A good reason, certainly. Well, I obey. To-morrow I shall bring you news of him. And now, pretty one, give me my payment. A kiss is not much to ask for the service you require."

His arms closed round her; his eager lips were close to her own. With the outraged passion of a woman, the fury of a child, she wrested herself from his embrace, and faced him in the wavering shadows of the dawn. "How *dare* you?" she cried furiously.

He surveyed her with amazed and angry eyes.

"Are you offended at that? Can you not spare one kiss from your soldier lover? How do you know that I shall not leave him to his fate, unless you bribe me with the caress I asked for?"

Her eyes literally blazed in their passionate scorn at the insolent words.

"A promise that needs bribery will never be kept," she answered curtly. "Forget that I ever asked you to serve me. It were dearly paid for at the price you ask."

"Stay," he implored, as she turned to the door. "Forgive me; I will not offend again. I will do your bidding."

"It needs not, if you are unwilling," she answered proudly. "I sue no man's favour if he wishes to retain it."

And with no other word she left him.

He went out into the quiet street, and the morning air struck chill and cold on his flushed and fevered face.

"The first time a woman has ever refused me anything," he said to himself; "and, strange to say, the novelty of the sensation is not unpleasant. I wish I was not going away so soon; this girl interests me. With such a scoundrel of a father, I wonder where she has derived her notions of honesty and purity. What is this Frenchman to her, I wonder? There can be but one tie possible between one of her youth and beauty and a man of his years; she said he was young."

Thus he mused going homewards through the quiet city. He was a man of wide power, of great wealth, of boundless self-indulgence. In all his life he had but to ask and to have, yet he had a calm wisdom that kept even his worst passions in restraint, and made them ministers to his pleasure, not masters of his life.

"When civilisation has laid a thousand conquests at my feet why should I waste a second thought on this beautiful barbarian?" he asked himself impatiently. But he could not answer the question, nor could he withhold the thought.

Meanwhile, Ninette went up to her room, her face still burning with its scorch of shame and indignation, her heart beating with the quick agonised throbs of mingled pain and anger.

"How dared he?" she said to herself again and again. "The lips that *he* once kissed no other shall ever touch while I have life and will to prevent it."

And she threw herself down and wept the hot scorching tears of utter despair and passionate longing, wondering whether any mortal power could ever cut asunder the meshes of the net that bound her now.

"He will never know," she sobbed, "never, and I loved him. Oh my love, if you could but have trusted me once, it would have been well with us now!"

She lay face downwards on the floor, deaf and blind to all but the sense of her own misery—the terror of her own despair. To think that he, her husband, was so near to her, breathing the same air, and yet far removed from all speech or sight of her yearning voice and her longing eyes—this was indeed a misery she scarce had strength to endure.

She tried to think calmly, dispassionately, but she could not. Of one thing only she was conscious, that her own sin, her own weakness had brought this ill upon him—that he lived on now a prisoner at the mercy of his foes, subject to all privations, enduring all possible sufferings—alone, broken-hearted, despairing—and she had given him this fate to bear. The gray chill shadows wrapped her prostrate form, the first sun-rays stole through the dim and desolate chamber. She rose and shivered, and gazed around, her eyes dull and blind with a mist of pain, and the slow sickening stabs of memory piercing her heart afresh. All she had previously endured seemed as nothing to what she suffered now. Now, when she had gazed upon his face once more, and read there the tale of his own sufferings and the scorn of her imputed sin, what could he believe of her but the worst? Had he not seen her with all the evidences of wealth and fashion, throned and surrounded with luxury, while he had dragged his weary limbs past her, a prisoner in the power of those among whom she dwelt in splendour and in safety?

"No power on earth could make him believe in me now," so she told herself again and again, and with each telling, wondered how long life would drag itself on, seeing that life meant nothing for her now but a keen sense of suffering that memory never deadened, and regret could never kill. Slowly and wearily she rose and went to the little window, and stood there gazing with throbbing aching eyes at the splendour of the sunrise as it swept the gray hues of the dawn from the face of the smiling sky, and flooded all the earth with light and glory. "Only to look at that would have made me happy once," she thought; "but now——"

The thought ended in a sob. One great grief and one great passion had absorbed all power of joy in any gift of nature, in any phase of life.

It seemed that one thing alone could set her free—death!

CHAPTER XI.

THE TEST OF ENDURANCE.

With what strength, what steadiness of mind,
He triumphs in the midst of all his sufferings!
Addison.

"To remain with the garrison, a strange fancy, truly. And you such a fire-eater, Colonel von Brandstein."

"You are doubtless surprised, Herr General, but my health is not sufficiently restored to join the forces."

"Well, doubtless you know your own affairs best, you must please yourself."

"And you will urge my request in the proper quarter?"

"Assuredly. All the same I am sorry to lose you."

"Not more sorry than I am to remain behind. All the same, however, I think the best of the fighting is over, and——"

"And you have no desire to sit quietly at the gates of Paris until the silly fools think fit to come out of their trap——"

"Exactly. His Majesty will be back soon, now; that, in itself, proves the campaign is over."

"Your reasons for staying are admirable, Colonel. I have nothing more to say."

The above conversation was taking place at Colonel von Brandstein's military quarters, the day succeeding his interview with Ninette.

The haughty Prussian officer had been thoroughly fascinated by the girl's beauty, and more by the piquancy of her manner, and the scorn with which she treated his advances. To will and to have, had so long meant one and the same thing for him, that her coldness and indifference roused in him an interest far deeper, a determination more fierce than any woman yet had been capable of inspiring. To this interest was now added jealousy. He was sure she loved this man—this French prisoner whom the fortune of war had delivered into his hands—so sure of it that he had been content to remain idle in the city while the fate of his country still hung undecided in the balance of events. So sure of it, indeed, that his eyes flashed, and his heart grew furious at the thought. He had fancied this girl would be an easy conquest, and now an array of difficulties faced him, all the more tantalising because of their strangeness and unfamiliarity.

"She shall be mine yet," he said to himself, with stern and savage earnestness. And Leopold von Brandstein had never thus resolved without accomplishing his purpose.

To him it seemed but a mere question of time. Sooner or later the bough must bend or break—the fruit be plucked or fall, according to its own tendency, according to his own limits of patience.

She had allured, angered, incensed him all in one, but he resolved none the less to bear the sharpness of her scorn, the goad of her irony, the spur of her coldness, for the sake of that allurement which was in itself so sweet and by difficulties grew more tempting. His eyes had read the hearts and natures of many women—they had never read one like this. To be pure in an atmosphere of vice, constant in the fire of temptation — these were indeed virtues he had never experienced, and which, though they won his reluctant admiration, never altered the determination of his heart. And with thoughts like these burning in his breast he went to the presence of his rival.

"So! and that is the fellow—a handsome brute! Böhmer, bring that soldier, Pierre Leroux, to me in the guard-room." The soldier gave the salute and departed on his errand, while the Colonel—his inspection of the prisoners over—sauntered away from the barrack-yard, his face dark, his eyes wrathful.

Ere long his commands were obeyed. The man he had desired to see stood before him—calm, grave, patient. On his face no surprise, in his eyes no question, though the summons had been so unexpected. The Colonel glanced at the list of names in his hand, then at the figure before him.

"Pierre Leroux?" he questioned.

"The same, monsieur," was the answer, given in French.

"I want a few words with you," said the Colonel, in the same language. "Böhmer, you may go." The man obeyed, and left them together.

Leopold von Brandstein darted a quick look at the face before him. "You are not a trained soldier?" he asked.

"No, monsieur."

"A recruit, I suppose?"

"I joined of my own free will."

"What were your reasons?"

"I was not aware that impertinent curiosity was the privilege even of—a conqueror!"

"*Mein Gott!*" shouted the officer furiously. "Dare you be insolent? Know you not I have full power here, and could sweep such vermin as you off the face of the earth in two seconds?"

"I do not doubt monsieur's power—or will—to do it."

"Come, come," laughed the Colonel, ashamed of his momentary loss of temper. "Don't let us fall to carte and tierce in this fashion. I wish to be your friend. I have heard something of you that interests me."

"Monsieur is pleased to jest. I have neither friend nor acquaintance who could have mentioned my name to him," was the calm response.

"Perhaps you are more fortunate than you imagine. It was a woman who spoke of you."

Despite his efforts at self-control, Pierre could not keep the hot flush from his face—could not still those heavy suffocating throbs of his heart at these words.

"I am right, I see," resumed the Colonel. "The cause that sent *you* to the wars, my friend, is not hard to guess. A woman had a hand in that, or I am much mistaken."

"I am at a loss to surmise how my private affairs can possibly interest monsieur." His questioner frowned angrily.

"Doubtless you are. But there is romance in most lives. I have mine, I would fain hear yours."

"The leaf is folded down to be opened at no man's bidding."

"Nor woman's either?" his tormentor persisted.

"I have told monsieur that though obedience is a soldier's duty, his private affairs are not subjects for an officer's inquisitive fancy to pry into."

"And I say they are, if it suits the officer to make them so. Listen, fellow! You are here a prisoner, alone, friendless, at the mercy of your foes. You are but a unit among many. Your fate none will know, unless we choose."

"Is it brave to taunt me with my powerlessness, or contrast it with your privilege of tyranny, monsieur?" asked the cold calm voice of the listening prisoner.

"*Gott im Himmel!* This man makes me angry and ashamed all in one," muttered the Colonel wrathfully. "Will nothing make him speak?"

"Listen!" he resumed presently. "It is not well for you to use your tongue thus freely. Remember I have it in my power to make you pay dearly for your insolence. Do you know that the woman you love is here, in this city—that she and I are well acquainted—that it is for her sake I have sought you out—that to please her I would do you a service? Do you know this?"

Every drop of blood seemed to leave the bronzed and patient face. He leant with a sudden dizzy faintness against the wooden pillar beside him. Leopold von Brandstein smiled sarcastically. "I have touched you at last," he said.

The man drew himself up with a soldier's instinct—a brave man's self-control. "I should be sorry to doubt monsieur's word," he said, in a voice cold, and stern, and passionless. "But any interest either of man or woman in my fate or fortune is alike unsought and undesired by me."

"Your desire is very singular."

"It may be."

"Are you content to wait for the issue of the war? Have you friends who would ransom you?"

"I have no friends."

"A wife, mother, sister, perhaps?" A sudden shiver ran through the strong well-knit frame.

"I had a mother—she is dead."

"And you feel no desire to know who is interested in your welfare here?"

"That she is so interested, and could speak of it to you, is in itself an insult," he flashed out, with sudden fury. The Colonel smiled, well pleased that at last he had aroused some warmth of feeling beneath that passionless repose.

"How has she offended you?" he asked. The man was silent.

"Ah, well, it matters not," Von Brandstein said, with covert insolence. "What you do not choose to tell she will. Now go."

Without a word or glance, Pierre raised his hand, gave the salute, and departed.

For a few moments the Colonel paced restlessly up and down the guard-room, then summoned to his presence the officer to whom the immediate superintendence and charge of the French prisoners had been given. "Niedmann," he said carelessly, "there is a fellow among that crew there—Pierre Leroux by name—who is both insolent and foolhardy. Keep a strict watch on him, and give him double work and half rations. He is dangerous—just the man to plot and scheme, and bring the others into trouble."

"You shall be obeyed, Herr Colonel."

And thus it was that Leopold von Brandstein kept his promise to the woman he loved.

Meanwhile Pierre Leroux left the room and joined the soldier who was waiting for him. He moved along mechanically. A numbing pain had settled in his heart, deadening him to all exterior sufferings or inconveniences that awaited him now.

Something in the weary suffering face, the patient ox-like eyes, touched the man beside him with compassion.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

"I ail nothing," was the answer, given in slow monotonous accents, as if his thoughts were far away.

The German's knowledge of French was but scanty, so conversation dropped. Still he looked pityingly at the tall upright figure that bore itself so courageously, that allowed of no weakness, and was at once so soldierly in its grace, so proud in its endurance. "A fine fellow," he said to himself. "What a pity he is a Frenchman!" But the man beside him thought only of those words that had proclaimed her false with more than woman's falseness—shamed with more than woman's shame.

"*Here* and *his* friend," he muttered, as his brow burned with a hot flush of shame at the thought of his outraged honour, his ruined manhood. "Her guilt is greater even than I thought. It were better I had slain her with my own hand that night when she lay at my feet!"

He moved like a man in a dream, he performed those offices and services demanded of him with strict punctiliousness and undeviating exactitude, but all the same, it was as the work of a machine, perfect but soulless, correct but unconscious.

In the activity of campaigning, and the excitement of warfare, he had been able to get some respite from the thoughts of his own wrongs—from the memory of her perfidy—but now he had only the dull routine of barrack-life, the servile employment, the scanty coarse fare, the inert and brain-sickening existence of a despised prisoner of war. As days passed on, he saw more and more clearly that something beyond the common insults and drudgery of his fellow-soldiers fell to his share. His work was the first to begin, the last to cease, his food the scantiest, his treatment the most insolent of all. Morning after morning he rose to the same weary round of ignoble tasks, to the same recurring petty irritations, to physical privation, to ceaseless tyranny, to all that could make his life most wretched and try his powers of endurance most severely. And he bore all with never a murmur—with never a complaint.

"Can I care that my enemies have no mercy on my body," he would ask himself bitterly, "when she whom I loved and worshipped had none upon my soul?"

Still weak from long illness, he often felt his strength scarce equal to the demands upon it, but yet he taxed its utmost powers—he spared himself no single task—he asked for no remittance of his labours. One day, long fasting and severe labour told upon him at last. Those watching him saw him sway suddenly forwards, then fall heavily to the ground. His eyes were closed—his face gray—on his beard was foam; he lay like a log where he had fallen, and the men who gathered about the prostrate form whispered but one word under their breath—"Dead."

"Is he drunk?" asked the ferocious taskmaster, who had been paid to do this work, and who was ruthless and fierce enough to miscall it patriotism.

"Drunk? no," muttered the soldier Böhmer, who alone of all the garrison really pitied and felt for this unfortunate prisoner. "It is a fit I think."

Even as he spoke the man's eyes unclosed, and looked upwards to the cold and callous faces around.

"Come, get up; no shamming," shouted his tormentor savagely. "We can't put up with this sort of thing here. You needn't pretend you are going to die just yet."

Böhmer held a draught of water to his lips, and raised him gently to a recumbent position.

Pierre looked gratefully up at him with

his patient eyes, and staggered to his feet with one vigorous effort.

"I *cannot* die," he said, with an agony in his voice that thrilled to the heart of the sympathising soldier beside him, who alone heard the words.

"So you're all right again. It's my belief you've been drinking," said his superior. "I report you for disorderliness and neglect. There's your work not half done. Haste and see it's completed before the midday rations are served out, or——"

A meaning glance completed the sentence as he turned on his heel and left the spot.

"*Tausend Teufel!*" muttered Böhmer, with fierce wrath in his voice and glance. "To think such a heartless brute should have it in his power to bully us!" Pierre looked gratefully down at him as if thanking him for that classification of sympathy.

"You are very good to me," he said gently, "and I cannot give you aught save thanks."

" Nothing is needed," muttered the soldier gruffly, " I am only sorry you have such a bad time of it among us here. Devil take me if I can understand why. It seems as if the Herr Commandant had some special grudge against you.

Pierre turned silently away. " Doubtless he has," he thought to himself. " He but obeys orders."

" You will not work now, you are not fit for it," pleaded Böhmer, following him eagerly.

Pierre smiled sadly at his entreating voice. " It is a soldier's first duty to obey," he said gently. The man's face flushed beneath all its sun-tanned darkness.

" A fit rebuke. *Ach! mein Gott!* that you were but a German ! "

It was the honest fellow's constant regret. He could not bear to think that discipline so exact—endurance so great—patience so exemplary, should belong to the ranks of his despised and beaten foe, yet his reluctant admiration grew deeper every day. He could not but see what heroism lay beneath that calm exterior—a heroism far nobler than any called forth by the tumult, danger, and excitement of war—a heroism that bore hunger, thirst, toil, insult, contumely, and yet gave no sign of insubordination, uttered no complaint of unmerited wrongs, and let the calm light of its influence shine alike on friend and foe till, if none loved, at least all revered him for it.

He braced his weary frame now as best he could. He turned to his duties and worked on steadily, uncomplainingly—to receive what?—a cut with the lash, a taunt from a mocking tone, a volley of oaths and threats that made his blood boil and his eyes flame with the indignation they sought to arouse. But the coarsest upbraiding and reviling could not make him forget in the presence of his compatriots the lesson he had so well learnt. He listened in silence, or with simple direct replies, but before those gleaming eyes of the prisoned soldiery, those fiery, indignant glances that seemed to urge him on to mutiny, and promise any support in insubordination, he would not relinquish the curb that held passion in such strong restraint, and gave for tyranny —obedience.

"You have carried out my orders well, Niedmann," said Colonel von Brandstein, that afternoon, as he stood talking to the Commandant. "That French soldier looks well broken in. By-the-bye, is his health good?"

"I think not. He had been very ill before he came on here, and to-day he had some sort of fit or other in the barrack-yard."

"Ah," murmured the Colonel thoughtfully. "Well, do not relax your care of him. We have too much of this useless lumber in the country now. A few bales here and there can easily be spared."

The other smiled meaningly.

"I suppose this man is one of the few?" he said, with marked emphasis.

"Your perspicuity is wonderful, Herr Commandant," said the Colonel as he half stooped to disentangle the sword-knot at his side. "He is."

CHAPTER XII.

"THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS."

> That he should dare to do me this disgrace!
> Is fool or coward writ upon my face?
>
> *Dryden.*

"I HAVE done your bidding," said Leopold von Brandstein as he took a seat by Ninette's side. "I have found out your friend and am trying to serve him."

It was very late; Léon Monprât had gone to the door to say farewell to some of his guests, and Ninette and the Colonel were alone. The girl turned eagerly towards him.

"Are you jesting, do you really mean it?" she asked hurriedly.

"I should never jest with you, mademoiselle," was the grave response. "I have said that I have done your bidding. But this man is a thankless brute. The very first offer of my services met with nought but insolence."

Despite his care, the strong hatred and jealousy he felt for the unfortunate man gave bitterness to his voice, and flashed for a moment in his eyes, but Ninette was too busied in the endeavour to master her own emotion to notice his.

"I am sorry for that," she said presently, in a voice that trembled, despite her efforts to control it. "But remember how hard a fate is his—a prisoner in a strange land, no friends, no liberty. He needs pity."

"He is fortunate in possessing yours."

She flushed hotly, then glanced at the dark handsome face beside her with a disdain in her own eyes that angered him more than her words.

"If you think fit to arraign my sympathies, monsieur, I think I had better retire."

"Wait," he said imperatively. "By heavens! I will know the truth of this matter. Do you love this man?"

She sprang away from his detaining grasp and faced him with an indignation that roused his admiration to fever point. She looked so lovely, thus, with her spirited head so proudly raised, her soft eyes brilliant in their anger, her hands clasped on her heaving bosom, as if to stay its stormy sighs.

"I shall not answer you. What right have you to question me thus?"

He laughed aloud.

"The right of my own love for you, *ma belle.* You need not pretend surprise. You know I love you as well as you know that the stars shine yonder."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"Why?" he asked passionately. "It cannot be that you have no tenderness, no sympathy for me. Listen, I could make you so happy. You should be as a sovereign in your wealth and beauty and omnipotence. All the treasures of the world I would pour at your feet. Your life should be as a dream of delight on a summer's day. Its hours winged by love, and set to the music of endless enjoyment. Poverty, sadness, discontent, should never touch you. Your name should mean to every man's ears all that is beautiful, imperious, celebrated. Every desire and caprice of your heart should be gratified, and all I ask in return is —your love."

Her laugh rang out on the midnight stillness, clear, mocking, derisive.

"Have you said all? I thought only God was omnipotent. The things you promise are not in the power of any mortal to bestow."

"They are in the power of Love."

For a moment her face softened, her thoughts went back to that blissful week when the music of one voice had transfigured her whole life with joy, when the language of love had spoken from eyes in whose gaze she could never again read its mute and passionate eloquence. She shook like a leaf where she stood, with the flame of the yellow lamplight on her bright hair and soft flowing dress. He gazed at her, and reading the softening face, the lustrous eyes, by the light of his own desires, he came nearer once more.

"Say the word, my beautiful, and I am your slave for ever."

She glanced at his flushed face, his pleading eyes with an amazed scorn, an expression of contempt and loathing that startled him.

"The word—what word?"

"That you will be mine; that you love me."

"Love you," she laughed scornfully; "you! why I have never even thought of you."

"By heaven, but you shall!" he shouted fiercely, as he drew her into his arms in the delirium and abandonment of the passion that her scorn only lashed to greater intensity, to hotter pursuit. She wrested herself from his grasp and flew to the door.

"This is the second time you have insulted me, Herr von Brandstein," she said. "It shall be the last."

And ere he could stay her she was gone.

An instant after Léon Monprât entered. His face was pale and troubled, his manner nervous and apologetic.

"I fear you are but a rough lover, *mein Herr*," he said deprecatingly; "you have frightened Ninette out of her senses."

Leopold von Brandstein drew a deep breath. His face was still flushed, his eyes dark with the mingled emotions that swept through his undisciplined heart. He felt furious with her, enraged with himself, in that he had so far forgotten the tact and courtesy with which he had resolved to woo her, and which had never failed him so utterly before. An imprecation fell from his lips now, that startled his hearer. Baffled passion, furious jealousy alone raged within him. He forgot all else.

"Hark you, Monprât," he said, "win her I will! The more difficult the conquest the stronger is my determination to make it. You promised to aid me—see that you do. You know you are in my power. A word from me and you will be a beggar to-morrow. My infatuation for this girl surprises even myself. I will make her my wife even, that I may be the more certain of her."

"Your wife!" fell from the astonished lips of Léon Monprât.

"Yes—I would do even that. I, who have held up matrimony as a social bugbear all my life long. It matters not what obstacles lie in my way. Once resolved on a thing I carry it out. Now, it seems absurd that two men should be thwarted in their plans by a weak girl. Swear to me you will aid me in this, and on the day that sees us wedded I will give you a release from the debts you owe, and settle on you for the future a sum that will indemnify you against even the hazards of gambling."

Léon looked at him with eyes incredulous and amazed.

"You will do this," he gasped, in bewilderment, "and for *her!*"

"I will—mad as it seems."

For a moment the man hesitated—some pitying instinct, some touch of natural compassion for the girl he had so bitterly wronged swept across his heart. "I would do it," he said slowly, at last, "but—there is a serious obstacle."

"What is it?" demanded the other, with uncontrolled impatience.

"She is already married!"

With one bound Leopold von Brandstein crossed the space between them and seized him by the throat.

"Hound, spy, liar!" he hissed. "Do

you dare to mock me? You swore she was your daughter."

The slender frame of the Frenchman swayed like a reed in the grasp of his powerful antagonist. His teeth chattered with terror, his limbs shook and trembled.

"So she is," he gasped.

"Then why did you utter that lie?" asked Von Brandstein, releasing him.

"It was no lie," answered the other doggedly. "She married a miller in her own village. When she joined me he took arms in the war; they had been wedded but a week."

"His name?" questioned the Colonel sternly.

"Pierre Leroux."

A low harsh laugh burst from the lips of the Prussian.

"So it *is* he. I was not far wrong when I scented a rival in him. A fine brute, but resolute and dogged as a mule. Well, he is safely netted. The wife of a week may soon be a widow. Listen, Léon. If war and sickness work their will, and chance ordains that this man may never claim his wife, will you then aid me in my plans? Win her I will, on that I am resolved."

"I will do my utmost for you," said the Frenchman humbly, "but——"

"No buts. Swear it or——"

"Hush," he said, looking timidly around, "I swear."

"Good. Now you may go. I will tell you my plans later on. Meanwhile, your work must be to soften her resentment against me, and never cease to point out the advantages my love will bestow on both. She has suffered for filial affection once, perchance she may sacrifice herself at its shrine again."

And with a mocking laugh he left the room.

Léon Monprât sat there for long. In his own selfish tyrannous way he loved this girl, and her sufferings touched him with a faint remorse. But he loved himself better, and the cowardice and the greed of his nature made him pliant as wax in the hands of his tempter. He dashed a tear from his eyes as he rose at last and prepared to seek his couch. He had a child's facile emotions of grief and pleasure, and mixed with his many acts of wanton cruelty, there lay a repentance and regret that were at once childlike in their evanescence and worthlessness. "I am sorry for her," he said to himself now, "very sorry; but she will have a brilliant life, if she but listen to his love, and I—I shall have safety!"

How much that last thought had to do with the resolution he had formed and the tragedy that was to follow, he never confessed even to himself. He sought rest and slumber, and found it too, while in the chamber above, the girl he was to betray lay in unconscious agony of the hours that passed or the schemes that would draw her into their meshes ere another day had fled.

Love was with her still—but love now meant only torture that would never end—regret that would never die.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE LION'S MOUTH.

Most women's weak resolves, like reeds, will fly,
Shake with each breath, and bend with every sigh:
Mine, like an oak whose firm roots deep descend,
Nor breath of love can shake, nor sigh can bend.
GAY: *Dione.*

SIX days passed. With the seventh her tormentor sought her again. His long absence had relieved her. She thought he would neither seek nor molest her more.

Had she known more of life, she would have known also, that stronger than the sweetness and endurance of love returned, is the pitiless pursuit of a love scorned.

She had besought and prayed her father

to leave this place, but he sternly refused. She withheld herself from his nightly assemblies, and kept strictly to her own small dreary room, but she could not escape her foe when he chose that she should again see him. It was noon when he called, and her father summoned her to his presence. Then, ere she could leave the room, or utter remonstrance, he locked the door, and she found herself trapped and snared ere she was aware of it. Like an enraged lioness she turned on the man before her.

"Is it at your bidding I am treated thus?" she asked, in a voice that rang clear and cold as the blows of steel on iron. He smiled—a cruel mocking smile that lashed her rage to threefold fury. "It is; you will not hear me by fair means."

"And so you use force—a manly action! but after the chivalry displayed in warfare by your countrymen, it does not surprise me that you have none left for women."

"You shall not anger me to-day," he

said coolly. "Be as scornful as you please. The lion's claw is preferable to the *patte de velours* sometimes."

"What do you want with me?" she asked abruptly.

"Much; but I would have you listen to reason in the first place. I fear I offended you on the last occasion we met. I have come to entreat your forgiveness."

"You are welcome to entreat it as long as you please."

"Without your granting it?"

"Yes."

"You are very truthful, at all events," he said, biting his lips angrily.

"That may be. I have not been educated in cities."

"But you *must* be friends with me," he pleaded. "Listen, and you will see how foolish you are to brave and defy my power. Do you know I could yield your father up to the government of his own country at any moment, and give him the fate of a deserter and a traitor? On your head would his blood be."

"To do so would be but in keeping with your conduct and character," she answered, calmly as ever, though every vestige of colour fled from her face at the terrible threat.

"And more," he said, slowly and sternly, with his ruthless eyes taking in every sign of emotion in the young white face before him. "I will have your husband treated like a dog till he dies a dog's death, and with his last breath curses your name as the giver of his tortures! Do you know what he believes you to be?"

The gray shadows of desperation fell over her, changing all her beauty into the chill colourless repose of marble.

"What vileness have you told him?" she demanded. He laughed aloud.

"Oh, I have touched you at last? Well, he thinks you what I would have made you—the sharer of my wealth—the mistress of my heart."

A cry of agony thrilled from her very soul as she heard those terrible words. "You have told him *that*," she wailed. "Oh heaven! are you a man or a fiend?"

"I am what my love for you has made me."

She threw herself at his feet in a sudden paroxysm of weeping that shook her as a storm-blast shakes a sapling. "Oh, for God's sake have mercy," she cried. "What have I done that you should try me thus? But a few short months ago, I was a glad-hearted, innocent girl, and now—oh, now—tears of blood could not wash away the memory of my sufferings! and with all I am innocent still. I have not done one wrong or shameful thing! and here you have made me in *his* eyes so vile, so infamous, that never again will his heart hold of me one tender memory, one gentle thought. You are a man—you had a mother once—can her memory not plead for me? What use would it be if I made myself the thing you wish—if for your wealth's sake I bartered my one sole possession? if you bought me as a slave who hates her owner and despises her slavery? For I loved once, but my love is all gone, and given for all time, and never through the furthest stretch of years I live, can I give it again. Oh, let me be, and spare him. Can you not sell your pity at my pleading?"

"You will not sell your beauty at mine."

"Oh God, I cannot——!"

"Even to spare his life? Even to buy his release? At a word from you I will set him free. He may return to his country in safety. So much I can do for him, at least. Will you not say the word, Ninette?"

"If you would only kill me," she moaned.

"Nay, that would be foolish, indeed," he said, with the cold cruel smile she hated. "You are young and beautiful, you have youth and passion, and even your strength will not be always strong. No, I can afford to wait, Ninette."

She rose and faced him with a despair terrible as death.

"I have told you I cannot love. What more do you seek?"

"To tame you, *ma belle.* You are wild now as a young fettered falcon. Well, like the falcon, I would have you tremble, and grow meek, and love the hand that has captured you unwillingly. You are reckless, proud, defiant—all these qualities charm me. I would not have them changed for worlds. You are foolish and unreasonable—otherwise you would not be a woman. Well, be it so. I am not angered, but I am resolved. Do what I wish, or you sacrifice both father and—husband (you see I have learnt your secret) to your obstinate folly."

She looked at him silently, with a loathing and contempt that were eloquent, though wordless, and for once made his face flush and his eyes sink before the haughty challenge of her own.

"I wonder if God made men," she said

quietly. "I think it must have been the devil."

He laughed aloud.

"Men have thought the same of women, my dear, many a time."

"I doubt not, when such men as you exist."

"We are not very complimentary, *ma belle.* Be wise, Ninette, and yield ere it is too late. You cannot hold out—it is impossible—strong as you think yourself. You are heroic, foolish, mad, just now. If your husband loved you I would not wonder at your obstinacy—but he does not—he hates and despises you."

"Oh, cease!" she wailed.

"It hurts you to hear it? Of course. No woman likes to think she loves in vain," pursued the mocking voice of her tormentor. "Well, you are innocent, and you suffer all the shame and ignominy of guilt. What do you gain by constancy. This man believes you fled from the security of your home with a lover; that wearied of that lover you have now come to me! You see you gain nothing by your refusal. He will never believe your life guiltless though you swore it by every oath that ever bound lips to the truth. Surely you see your folly?"

"I see your vileness. If my hatred could deepen, your words would sound its lowest depths."

"So be it," he said calmly, in no way shamed by her scorn. "I will give you six days to consider your decision. With the seventh I am here again. But remember, each day adds fresh tortures to your husband's life; his health is weak; his privations great. You condemn him to a hard fate, and for what? the chimera of a virtue none believe in—he least of all. What do you say?"

"What do I say?" she replied slowly, as she turned her heavy, piteous eyes on his hard and scoffing face. "I say this. I wonder no longer that women ere now have found strength and will for murder!" And she turned away as if indeed the deed she spoke of had already breathed its tempting to her soul.

He gave the preconcerted signal agreed on between Léon Monprât and himself, and the door opened to allow of her egress. Like a bird freed from its prison, she flew from the room and from the hateful presence of the man who had stolen from her life its last hope. But in her heart her choice was made.

"I wronged him once," she said, "but never again—never again." And threats and persuasions were alike of no avail, because of her great love.

CHAPTER XIV.

"CHARITY."

> 'Tis the first sanction nature gave to man,
> Each other to assist in what they can.
> *Sir J. Denham.*

At noon next day, when Léon Monprât sought his daughter, she was nowhere to be found. In the darkness of the night she had fled, leaving for him only these words of farewell:

"You have betrayed me. Our bond is broken."

Startled and bewildered he stood there—the winter sunlight on his face—a fear he could not master stealing over his heart. "Gone—fled!" he muttered. "Heaven!

what shall I do? He is so merciless, and I am utterly in his power." Even while he stood there, a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, a harsh voice sounded in his ears.

"Is this your care? You have let her escape thus easily!" The Frenchman shook with a coward's fear in the grasp of his pitiless foe.

"I could not know," he murmured extenuatingly. "She said no word—gave no sign."

He laughed aloud. "You fool! as if she would. Your pliant reed was stronger than you deemed, my friend. And now what are you going to do?"

Léon looked at his persecutor in helpless bewilderment. "Do?" he said. "What can I do?"

"Find her, of course. She cannot be hard to trace. She has not a friend here, her knowledge of the language is but slight. Gold will buy any secret—it has a thousand eyes. Ere to-morrow's sun has set I will bring you some information, or I am much mistaken."

The Frenchman gazed at him as if fascinated. "Your power is wonderful," he said.

The Prussian laughed aloud. "Take you heed how you thwart it, my friend. If it had not been for your confounded folly this would never have happened. Never try and slip your head out of the noose as your fair daughter has done, otherwise it will be worse for you a thousand times than for her."

In a mean obscure part of the city, two women were busily engaged in laundry-work. One was a fair, plump, smiling damsel, with the mild blue eyes and fair hair of the German peasantry; the other old, and wrinkled, and ugly, yet with a certain good-humour in the brown, withered, old face, and cheery smiling lips that bore some resemblance to the girl. They were mother and daughter—they were poor, honest, hardworking women, gaining a livelihood by washing for the soldiery, and content with their black bread and cabbage soup and sauerkraut; harmless, inoffensive people, of whom none had ever said a hard word, or uttered a slander.

"Haste, Gretchen," said the old woman presently. "We are behind with the work to-night. You were so long on your errands this afternoon that it has put it all back." The girl blushed rosily. "Whom met you in the city?" asked the old woman shrewdly. "Hans Böhmer again?"

"Yes, *meine mutter. Ach,* it was he who was in sorrow and downcast to-day, for his heart is heavy for that poor French prisoner, of whom he told us last week. He fears he will die."

"Is he so ill then?"

"Ill—yes; and so cruelly used too. Hans says it makes his heart ache to see how he suffers, and never a word of complaint does he utter, and though he is a foe one cannot help but pity him."

"Is he worse treated than the rest then?"

"Yes, so Hans says, and no one knows why; but the Herr Commandant Niedmann seems to hate him, and Hans told me to-day there is someone besides Herr Niedmann, someone higher in rank, and of great power and influence."

"And does the Commandant of the garrison really ill-use this poor man?"

The girl nodded, and pursed up her rosy lips mysteriously.

"Hans must be careful what he says," the old woman said, lowering her voice and looking fearfully around. "These are troublous times, Gretchen, and the police are ever on the watch. See you repeat no word of this to anyone save me, or harm may come of it."

"The Fatherland would be well enough if it were not for the police," the girl said mutinously. "It is hard indeed to have to keep watch over word and action as one must do here."

"Hush!" her mother said warningly. "What was that?" They paused in their work and listened.

A low faint knock came at the door. "Go and see, Gretchen," commanded her mother, and the girl, her rosy face pale with fear lest some of those very messengers of ill she had been abusing, were at hand, obeyed, and lifted the latch. A woman's form crouched at the threshold—a pitiful pleading face looked up, and met the questioning timid gaze of the waiting girl.

"Will you let me rest, and give me a glass of water for pity's sake?" a voice entreated in broken German.

"Surely we will," Gretchen said gently and compassionately. "Come in, do not be frightened." The stranger rose and entered the homely room with her guide.

"Mother," the girl said hastily. "It is a poor wayfarer who needs rest. She may enter?"

"She is welcome," said the old woman heartily as her kind eyes turned to the lovely shrinking face and form that followed Gretchen. "Sit down," she said in German. "We are just about to sup; pray join us."

"A glass of water is all I need, thank you," said the sweet faint voice of the stranger.

Gretchen gave her a seat by the stove, and her mother busied herself in preparing the supper, and speedily placed before the wayfarer a bowl of steaming soup and a slice of black bread. She looked up gratefully at her hostess.

"How kind you are," she said.

"Kind? Nonsense!" the woman answered, touched inexpressibly by the gentle voice and fair lovely face; and marvelling much in her honest heart what trouble or straits of necessity had driven her to seek charity in this wise.

"I am in great trouble," the stranger

said presently, moved to confidence by the kindness she experienced. "I am utterly friendless and homeless. In all this great city I have no one to whom I can go, nor resting-place for my foot."

"Poor child!" said the woman compassionately. "Have you a mother?"

"No, she died years ago."

"*Ach, lieber Gott!* And you are so fair and so young! What will you do here?"

"I do not know."

"You are not of our land?"

"No."

"And these are such bad times," said the old woman sadly. "Everyone looked at with suspicion, the police ever on the watch for spies and traitors. Are you of France? your tongue seems to say so."

"I come from Normandy."

"But you are well born?"

"I am a peasant."

"*Gott im Himmel!* And what brings you here? You are not a prisoner?"

"No, thank God! I was brought here against my will; but I am pursued by enemies, ruthless and unscrupulous."

"And if they find you?"

"A fate worse than death awaits me."

The woman looked at her own bright-faced, buxom daughter—a mother's compassion, a woman's pity for this friendless, beautiful creature crept into her heart."

"If I can serve you in any way, I will," she said gently. "Tell me but one thing—it is not sin that has driven you to such a fate?"

"As God hears me—no."

"Then I will do my best to help you, if you will let me."

"You are very good," the girl said wearily, "but no one can help me, and if you get yourself into trouble for my sake, I shall never forgive myself."

"You need not fear—no trouble will come of it. Tell me, first, are you likely to be sought?"

"Yes; and by men clever and unscrupulous."

"Do you think you have been tracked here?"

"No, I met no one. I took all the loneliest poorest streets. I shall not be missed till to-morrow at noon."

"*Gut!*" muttered the old woman. "Now, Gretchen, thou art quick of wit. Dost think it possible to harbour this poor girl until the search is over—until some plan for her safe return to her own land can be formed?" The girl sat looking thoughtfully at the stranger's beautiful face.

"She does not look like one of *us*," she said emphatically, "and her hands are those of a lady." The stranger flushed with evident embarrassment.

"Not so," she said. "My mother was a peasant—my life, till within the last few months, was simply a peasant's life. I am no lady."

"It would be hard to believe that,"

answered Gretchen admiringly. "Stay—let me think. Mother," she said suddenly, "I have a plan."

"Thou wert ever a clever girl, Gretchen," said her mother approvingly. "Let us hear it."

"You remember when Cousin Fritz was here a summer ago?"

"Assuredly," said the old woman, looking puzzled. "But what has that to do with thy plan?"

"Patience," said the girl, smiling contentedly. "He left behind him his peasant's dress of the Odenwald. Do you remember that?"

"Yes; it is in thy chest. I do but wait the first opportunity to return it to him."

"Well, if you, *fräulein*, do not object, here is a disguise for you that will defy your enemies. I am quite sure of it. To all inquiries we can say that you are a brother of Fritz—he has many—and no one will molest you. You may stay here, then, as long as you please."

"But her hair, Gretchen, and her face; it is so truly a woman's face?"

"My hair is soon dispensed with," cried the stranger eagerly, as she rose to her feet, and clasped the brown, hard, wrinkled hands of her new protector. "Oh, how can I thank you enough? Such kindness and compassion to an utter stranger is indeed beyond all my power to recompense."

"My child," said the old woman gently, "I have a daughter too. Had heaven willed that the fortune of war should be reversed, had she been in a strange land, at the mercy of a cruel foe, I would have prayed that God might raise up for her some such protection as it is in my humble power to offer you. Say no more."

The girl did not speak; she only knelt at the feet of her preserver, and shed such grateful, thankful tears as for long had not relieved her weary brain.

"Come and rest now," said Gretchen kindly; "you must be tired and spent. To-morrow you will cut off your hair and assume this dress; I think you need fear no discovery then."

"Is she not clever, this Gretchen?" asked the mother admiringly. "To think that she should have invented so wise a plan!"

"You are good—too good," said the girl, "but I cannot live on your charity. You are poor and work hard—that I see. It is not fit that you should be burdened with other cares."

"Do not vex thyself. We will find thee work soon enough," said the old woman cheerily. "It was but to-day I was saying to Gretchen I scarce knew how to manage the additional labour we had undertaken. We wash for the garrison, you must know." The girl started, and turned her white face and wild sad eyes on her informant.

"For the garrison," she faltered, "where the prisoners are?"

"The same. Art thou frightened? It need not alarm thee. Thou wilt not be seen by the guard, ever; but the work is ready for thee to do if thou hast the strength and the will."

"I have both."

"It is well. The little closet yonder will do for thy sleeping-place, and now talk no more of charity, thy wages will support thee —for the rest——"

"For the rest," said Gretchen gaily, "you bring your own welcome, Cousin Hans, for so we must call you."

"Ah, of a certainty thou choosest the name nearest thy heart, Gretchen!" laughed her mother. "She is betrothed to a soldier, one Hans Böhmer, thou must know. He belongs to the garrison—a good man and of tender heart. He comes here sometimes. Nay, do not tremble so; thou needst not see him."

"I would wish it," the girl said eagerly. "Oh that I might see him, hear him speak of those whose fate is so hard and cruel."

"The prisoners, dost thou mean? Ah, I forgot, they are countrymen of thine."

"Do you know any of them by name?" asked Gretchen eagerly.

"One," was the answer given slowly and painfully, while the flush of crimson that had dyed the girl's white face subsided, and left her pale as before.

"Perchance you may hear news of him then," said Gretchen. "Hans Böhmer is very kind, he tells me often of those poor men; more especially of one who has been severely used by the Commandant of the garrison, for what reason Hans cannot imagine."

"Do you know his name?" asked the stranger, with a wistful entreaty in her voice that showed how momentous the question was to her.

"No, Hans never told me, but I will ask if you wish. I hope, though, he is no friend of yours, for it would grieve you to hear what Böhmer recounts of his treatment."

"Is this the way that Germany treats her conquered foe?" asked the girl proudly.

"Nay, be not vexed," said the old woman gently. "It is not Germany—private grudges do not count, dear child. This case is unusual. We, who have heard of it from Böhmer, grieve also for the poor man; but no one can aid him."

A shadow of deep pain crept across the face of the listening girl.

"No one," she moaned, unconscious of her hearer's wonder. "Ah dear Heaven! no one. Since she who loves him best is his greatest enemy."

When she had left them and gone to the rest she so sorely needed, the two women sat for long by the stove discussing her strange advent.

"I feel so sorry for her," the old mother said. "A young, beautiful, forlorn thing, astray in the great cruel world like that. *Ach, mein Gott!* how hard it seems."

"She is not happy," said soft-eyed Gretchen, with wonder in her voice and face.

"Happy! No. She looks to me like a beautiful, gold-plumaged, foreign bird that I once saw in a cage in the Thier-Garten. It hung its head, and its soft wild eyes looked through the bars, and the children called it, but never a song nor a sound had it, but just stood there and looked as if with freedom had departed all its life. So does she."

The pretty German maid sighed compassionately.

"Will she stay with us, think you?" she asked at length.

"I hope she will. Here, at least, she will have rest and safety."

"But if they track her? The police are so clever, you know."

"My child, there never was a deed of mercy yet that the good God could not shield and protect. We need not fear. We have done no wrong."

And they kissed each other, and having said their evening prayer, lay down and slept with humble grateful hearts, racked by no fear of consequences for that charity which "thinketh no evil."

CHAPTER XV.

"PAROLE D'HONNEUR."

"LEROUX," said Böhmer, coming close to him in the exercise-yard, "I have good news for you." The listless patient face turned towards him.

"For me? What news can you have that would be good? Even my release from this den of misery would not give me happiness or content."

"Nonsense. You take too gloomy a view of everything," said the kind-hearted German. "Well, I have brought you a letter. It is from a countryman of your own, so at least my sweetheart told me. How she came by it is a mystery, but perhaps it has good news or may treat of ransom. Who knows! I only hope it may, for this life would kill you soon; I am sure of that."

"A letter, did you say?"

"Yes; and from a compatriot. Take heed no one sees you read it. It is as much as my life is worth to carry it to you, but then Gretchen pleaded so prettily and asked so tearfully—what could I do? Here, take it, but don't read it, for the love of heaven, till you are safe and unobserved." The tiny missive was passed rapidly from hand to hand, none seeing the transfer, and Leroux concealed it in the bosom of his coat.

Ninette, safe and sheltered still from the ever-dreaded discovery of her whereabouts, had formed a plan, desperate and hopeless enough, but woman-like in its very self-sacrifice and devotion. It was this:

Knowing that Hans Böhmer was the lover of the kind-hearted girl whose ready invention had completely concealed her own identity, she persuaded Gretchen to coax him into delivering a letter to her husband with a plan for his escape. Her object was to induce Böhmer to assist him. At dead of night, when the German had the sentry duty, this could easily be managed. Once out of the garrison Gretchen was to meet him with the peasant suit which had so well disguised his wife. The necessary papers and forms would be obtained as if for the departure of "Cousin Hans." Thus disguised, he could make his way out of the city—take the train for whatever place he deemed best, and then, at the first opportunity possible, make his way to France. Of the risk she herself ran by resuming her woman's attire, Ninette thought nothing. To save her husband from the torture and oppression he daily endured, this was her only thought. She preserved her own part in the plan a strict secret, knowing well that believing what he did of her, the mere mention of her name would have deterred him from attempting to escape. The letter containing these directions purported to be from a French soldier, and was written in their own language.

As Pierre Leroux read it in solitude that night by the light of the misty moon-rays, his heart for a moment bounded with hope. Free! To be free once more—to quit this hateful tyranny—to bid farewell to persecution—cruelty—suffering! The thought was in itself relief. A moment after, his face paled, his hand trembled—the letter with its sweet insidious tempting, was crushed in his grasp.

"My *word*—I have given my word," he muttered.

And that was the only answer honour permitted.

Though the gates of his prison stood open, and none barred his progress back to liberty, he could not forget that he was on "parole"—that simple soldierly code of honour bound him in chains firmer than any his foes could forge. He bent his head now, and a sudden scorch, as of tears, fell from his aching eyes under their closed and heavy lids.

"Someone at least pities me," he thought. "She whom I loved is alone heartless. What is liberty, safety, to me now?"

With the next day his answer was given to Böhmer to transmit. "Say I thank my unknown friend," he said gently; "but I am on parole. I can say no more"—and the great rough kindly German was touched to the heart by those brave simple words.

When he carried his message back to Gretchen that night, she heard it with unparalleled wonder. "*Lieber Gott!*" she cried; "how brave he must be, and how good! I thought the French all cowards."

"There are good and bad in every nation and land, little one," said her lover. "But this man is indeed a hero."

"He must be," she said softly, and Ninette in the little room within heard and echoed the words, even amidst her wild despairing tears.

"What shall I do? What can I do?" she thought in her agony. "It is I who have given him to this fate. Why can I not suffer for him?

She lay there prostrate, in a grief that racked her with the sharpness of remorse, in the exhaustion of a suffering she scarcely had strength to bear. When the soldier had gone and Gretchen stole softly to her side with the tidings of their ill success, she lay on her narrow bed, white and senseless and still as death.

Ere the morning broke, she was in the clutches of a terrible fever.

Days passed on.

In fear and trembling the good woman and her daughter nursed the girl. Medical aid they dared not summon for fear of discovery. They did their best; they gave her such simple remedies as they knew of, but she lay unconscious of every effort and every remedy. She was tormented only by incessant thirst, by the pressure of deadly pain on her aching brow, as if an iron hand was weighing down her restless throbbing brain. Paroxysms of delirium alternated with the stupor of exhaustion, and she lay unknowing aught of the passage of time, of how hours and days lapsed into weeks, and her danger increased with each. At last the darkness which had so long engulfed her reason began to clear. Slowly consciousness and memory returned, the youth and strength in her frame refused to be quenched, and struggled back to life again, even when life seemed almost over.

"She will live!" said the old woman, with tears in her eyes.

"She will live, the good God be praised!" echoed Gretchen gladly and gratefully.

The sick girl turned her great wistful eyes on them with a wonder that awed their joy and held them silent. "Is *that* a thing to be glad of?" she asked, and turned her face to the wall and wept the slow hot tears of weakness and despair.

That others should be glad because this living death of an uncared-for existence was still hers, seemed at once so sad and strange. Yet the gift was restored to her, the burden laid upon her thankless shoulders, to bear again until God in His own good time should remove it and bid her rest!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN IRONS.

The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on;
And doves will peck, in safeguard of their brood.
Shakespeare.

As time passed on and Colonel von Brand stein's search was still unsuccessful, his rage and fury knew no bounds. That his skill and ingenuity could be baffled by a weak girl enraged him beyond expression, and yet it was so.

No tidings whatever could he learn of Ninette from the day she had fled from her father's house until the present moment. The humble quarter where she was concealed had not even escaped police vigilance, but all in vain. In her picturesque disguise, with her close-cropped curls, and the tiny moustache which Gretchen had insisted upon procuring for her, she looked a complete peasant-boy, and might have challenged detection even from the Prussian officer himself. The old woman's tale of a visit from her nephew was never questioned. She was well known as a simple, pious, hard-working woman, and Gretchen was quick-witted enough to ward off any troublesome inquiries. They were therefore not molested, though when Ninette's dangerous illness had been at its height they had been terribly alarmed, for fear it might have caused inquiry and led to serious results.

When the baffled Prussian saw that his researches were fruitless, he revenged himself by a tenfold persecution of the unfortunate man who had all unwittingly aroused his hatred. They rarely came in actual contact now, but the Commandant carried out the Colonel's instructions to the letter, partly because he was himself a fierce partisan, and hated the foe with implacable enmity, partly because he was in some measure indebted to Von Brandstein for the position he held, and did not wish to lose his influence.

Pierre Leroux certainly gave as little cause as a man well could for the dastardly cruelty and insolent opprobrium that were his daily portion. He felt it all deeply, but bore it silently, and save for the flush that would sometimes colour his bronzed face, or the flash that would sometimes light his eyes, he gave no sign of resentment or rebellion.

It was about three weeks after Ninette's flight that Leopold von Brandstein again sought an interview with Leroux. The Prussian had suddenly become convinced that he must know of her flight, and perhaps of her place of concealment. It was an illogical and foolish idea, but love, jealousy, and baffled passion had deprived him of his usual calm reasoning powers, and for once he acted on impulse, and sent for his foe.

The man was brought to his presence, and as his ruthless eyes swept over the pale haggard face, the thin weak figure that scarce had strength to stand with the erect soldierly grace of old before him, he saw how well his orders had been carried out.

"You look ill," he said coldly. "Are you tired of a prisoner's life yet?"

"I am tired of my own. I shall, doubtless, have to thank my foes soon for shortening it."

"You are as quick with your tongue as ever. Have you any complaints to make?"

"None. I know how useless it would be."

The dark fierce countenance before him turned livid with rage.

"If you are not less insolent I will

have you thrashed within an inch of your life."

"You are not more anxious to have that life than I am to yield it up, monsieur."

"Say you so? Well, perhaps I have something to tell you that may sweeten it. You remember the woman I told you was interested in your welfare?"

"I remember monsieur thinking to delude me with such a belief."

"Oh, you do? Well, I have sent for you to-night to learn her whereabouts. That you know it I am sure. I am resolved to tear the secret from you at any cost, even of your life. This is no idle threat. I mean it to the very letter. Tell me where she is!" The man laughed hoarsely and scornfully.

"You ask *me* of your mistress's whereabouts? Are you mad, monsieur, or am I?"

"When I told you that, I lied," said his adversary fiercely. "She is nothing to me.

I learnt only lately that she was your wife. Well, where is she now?"

Pierre looked at him in incredulous amazement.

"This is a poor jest," he said, calmly. "I know nothing of any woman whom monsieur is pleased to honour with his attentions. Even if I did——"

"Well?"

"I should not tell."

"Dog! Do you dare to brave me thus? You lie. You do know where she is. Out with it, or I will wring the truth from your throat as I would wring a bird's neck."

"You are welcome to do so. It is your prerogative doubtless to—murder. Well, it will be the one benefit I have derived from my foes!"

Von Brandstein rose to his feet, literally trembling with rage and passion. His eyes swept over his antagonist, meeting nothing but the patient, calm disdain that no threat could change to fear, no bribe could win to deference. For an instant they faced each other thus, both silent. Von Brandstein spoke at last.

"To kill you would be too great a boon to bestow on you. No, you shall live. But listen first. I have that to tell which will make you curse your folly till the last day of your life. In the first place, this woman—your wife of a week—whom you like a madman forsook in a moment of frenzy, has never wronged you even by a thought, all the while that you have believed so ill of her. She has been basely deceived, cruelly wronged; but for all that, she is a heroine in her bravery and endurance, a saint in her purity, a woman in her fidelity. Does it hurt you to hear this? To think of all you have lost by your rash action! Ah, you are silent now! What, incredulous still, and she has loved you? Oh, fool, fool! Why, to stand in your place and hear these words, and know an enemy's lips reluctantly confessed their truth, I would die a dog's death the next hour!"

Over the soldier's weary, suffering face a great wave of feeling swept.

"Why do you torture me thus?" he cried. "It is not true. It cannot be——"

"It is true. I will prove it."

"Do so."

"You believed your wife fled from you with a lover, did you not?"

"Her own words confirmed that belief."

"The man whom she sheltered at risk of her own reputation, the man for whose sake she has become an outcast, for whom she has borne your desertion, and your base interpretation of her motives, is her father!"

There was utter silence.

One gasping breath the man drew, one shiver as of some terrible and intense emotion shook his limbs, then over the darkness and haggard misery of his face a light as of glad and glorious hope flashed.

Forgetful of all around, of the presence in which he stood, of the doubts that had racked and tortured him so long, he threw himself down on the bench beside him, and burying his face in his hands he wept like a child.

"God forgive me! Oh, God forgive me!" he cried, with the cry of a heart breaking with its own glad rapture of relief. "How I have wronged her!"

His enemy looked on him as he lay crouched there in the abandonment and forgetfulness of that moment. "You believe me now," he said.

There was no answer. The man did not even hear him. He came nearer, and laid his hand on his shoulder and shook him with savage force. "Do you hear?" he asked. "If you believe in her, confess where she is hidden. Have you held communication with her? Say!"

Pierre looked up. His face still radiant with that wonderful knowledge, his eyes glowing with the intensity of a love that had never died, and now seemed but to have gathered fresh force from its many sufferings, its long denial. "I will say nothing," he answered calmly. "Her very name is polluted by its passage through your lips!"

Von Brandstein threw himself on the foe who dared thus to brave him, and with his hand at his throat he shook him to and fro till the breath came in spasmodic gasps from his lungs, and his weakened frame lay like a log where he had thrown it. In the struggle a paper fell from the man's bosom. The eagle eyes of his adversary caught sight of it, he sprang forward, raised it from the ground, and began to peruse its contents.

"So!" he shouted, triumphantly. "I have caught you at last, my fine soldier! My saintly martyr! A plot indeed—and as I live—Heavens, it is her writing!"

"*Hers!*"

These words brought back life and strength to the stunned and weakened frame. With one bound he staggered to his feet and hurled himself upon his powerful foe.

All was forgotten now. The long endurance, the gentle patience, the inexorable self-control of the past weeks. All he remembered were the wrongs dealt to him and to her—the insult that had struck him down—the revelation of her efforts to save and rescue him, while he had been thinking of her all that was vile, scandalous, unjust! How plainly he saw it all—swift as a lightning-flash. This unknown friend—this patient watcher over his welfare—who could it have been but the woman who had loved him so well, and of whom he had been so quick to believe ill! These thoughts nerved him with the strength of desperation—almost of hatred.

Reeling, swaying, struggling breast to

breast, so they strove, silently — relentlessly. But the enfeebled frame of the French soldier was no match for the ferocious strength of his antagonist. A moment, and there was a crash—a heavy fall that echoed afar, and brought the soldiers from the guard-room and courtyard in a tumultuous mass.

They saw the powerful frame of the Prussian officer trembling with a tempest of passion—his foot on the fallen body of the man he had injured and tortured so long, and on his face the lust of a furious hatred—a blood-thirsty longing, terrible as the shadows of premeditated crime.

"Take him hence!" he said to the men, "and put him in irons for the night. He has concocted a plot to escape, and struck a superior officer. He will learn his fate soon enough!"

And with heavy hearts and a great

compassion for one who they knew had at last been tried beyond his strength, the men bore him away to his solitary cell!

CHAPTER XVII.

"CONDEMNED !"

IN the darkness of his close small cell, with the heavy tramp of his guards alone waking the stillness around, Pierre Leroux lay throughout that weary night. With consciousness came back the memory of all his folly had brought upon him—the words of his foe—the sweetness of the knowledge of her innocence that even gave him gladness in this hour of martyrdom.

"Oh God!" he prayed, again and again, "to be free only for one hour! To see her face once more, and tell her I believe in her at last."

But when freedom might have been his

the bond of his word had fettered him as with iron, and now in the eyes of all men he was a traitor, and arraigned on the heaviest charge that could be laid against a soldier. The hopelessness of his fate came home to him at last with a bitterness he had never deemed possible. But now he knew her guiltless, stainless, pure, as when he had taken her to his heart; and his whole soul went out in that one intense longing—that fierce imploring cry, "To be free—only for one hour!"

He looked down at his fettered limbs in mute agony. Of bodily suffering, weakness, pain, even of the fate in store for him, he did not think—only of her. He had wronged her so deeply, judged her so harshly, and through all she had loved him with a love whose depth and purity he had never fathomed before, till it came home to him with the divine force of a resistless truth, wrung from the reluctant lips of his powerful rival.

"What she has suffered!" so he said to himself, again and again. "And I—her protector—her guardian—the sharer of her life. I was the first to misjudge and forsake her."

He grew delirious in his agony as he thought of it. As he pictured her now—hunted, oppressed, pursued by ruthless foes, by a passion merciless and cruel as the grave, the violence of his hatred against this powerful enemy increased to fever point. It was not for himself he feared death now, not for himself that he would have recalled the blow, whose penalty his life would pay—but for her. For her who would be at his rival's mercy henceforward, for her whose youth, and beauty, and wealth of love and faith were all sacrificed because of his want of trust. "If she had only told me," he moaned in his feverish remorse. "How could I dream it was her father she sheltered?"

For he was in ignorance as yet of the

oath she had taken, of the cowardly desertion and traitorous betrayal of which this man had been guilty. He knew nothing of the struggle between a daughter's duty and a wife's love that had so perplexed and tortured the girl's young, loving heart. He knew nothing of the cause that had induced her to accompany her father in his hour of peril, seeing that her husband no longer believed in her, and had forsaken her —first! Now it was all too late. He had no hope left. With the morrow the court-martial would sit—his fate would be decided, and then——

As that thought crossed his mind he threw himself on his knees—his fettered hands upraised to heaven—the hot tears raining down his white, sunken cheeks. "Oh God!" he prayed, "if in Thy courts above there is atonement for earth's sufferings, or forgetfulness of earth's pain, let me meet her there, since here we may not ever meet in life again."

With the next day's noon the trial began. The case was brief, clear, indefensible. The plan of escape fortunately gave no names, bore no address, but the fact of its being in his possession was conclusive evidence. The soldiers gave witness as to hearing the struggle between the Prussian officer and the prisoner. Colonel von Brandstein swore to the assault, stating that the man was evidently desirous of regaining possession of the paper by violence. The statements were concise and plain enough.

When Leroux was asked if he had anything to say he merely replied that the provocation given had been too strong for any man to resist, and that Von Brandstein had, in the first place, seized him by the throat and given him the lie direct. When questioned as to the plan of escape, he refused to say from whence it had come, or who had contrived to deliver it, but said that being on parole he had declined taking any steps in the matter, and if he had intended to escape he would not have waited three weeks before making the attempt. He knew that what he had done was unjustifiable in military law, but he begged his judges to take into consideration the tyranny and cruelty to which he had been subjected ever since his entrance into the garrison. His enemies themselves could bear witness to that, and therefore he considered himself morally exonerated, if for once he had dealt with his tyrant and traducer as man to man, not as soldier to officer.

"I know I stand at a disadvantage here," he said. "I am a prisoner at the mercy of my enemies. I can hardly expect you to believe that with the means of escape at hand I refused to profit by them; yet, with death before me, I solemnly swear I speak but the truth. This story may be hushed up—doubtless it will—but truth, sooner or later, comes to the fore; and then, in other lands and in other tongues will my wrongs be proclaimed at last, and men will learn how Germany allows private animosity to take the lead of public justice, when dealing with a conquered foe!"

There was an instant's silence. The faces of the judges grew sterner and paler. Something in the noble bearing, the calm, heroic face of the prisoner touched them with compassion. Yet they knew his doom was sealed. Military justice is stern in its exaction, undeviating in its decrees. With the close of that day his sentence was pronounced. He must die.

He who had so long prayed for death as the sweetest boon man could bestow, trembled as he heard his doom. Then his eyes turned on his foe and met his malicious, exulting glance with the calmness of despair.

"You have your triumph," he said so low that scarce anyone heard him. Then he was led back to his cell, there to await the end of his martyrdom.

Faint and weak with long illness, Ninette lay in her close, narrow room. The confinement, the absence of air, the loathing of life, all combined to weaken the vigour of a frame used to the freedom of fields, the freshness of cool, sweet winds, the width of meadow and forest, and whose eyes yearned for the sight of far-stretching skies, unbounded by a city's myriad roofs.

All the inborn instincts of her free, glad peasant-life returned. She thought only of her old, sweet Norman home, where the peace of the silent country reigned, and the sun fell golden on the waving fields of colza and of corn. She thought of the mill-stream's happy song — of the foam-bells dashing on the great, brown timbers of the turning wheel—of the radiance of summer flowers —of the rich scents of the roses round the porch — of the gleam of the snow-white lilies, in whose cups the butterflies loved to hover and rest—of the coo of the bright-plumaged pigeons as they flew to and fro from their little arched homes—of the vesper chimes from the village church nestled in those quiet fields. All these thoughts and memories came back to her as she lay there alone, with the ban and curse of a cruel fate upon her young, desolate heart, and an utter hopelessness and despair in her soul.

Through the silence around her, a voice suddenly pierced—a voice that made her start and tremble as she heard it, and forced from her lips a cry of intense fear. Another instant, and amidst the shrill clamour of the old woman's cries, and the sturdy resistance of Gretchen, the door was thrown violently open, and Léon Monprât stood before her.

"Father!" burst from the girl's pale lips. He threw himself before her, and caught the folds of her dress in his hands.

"Oh, Ninette! can you ever forgive me?"

"What is it?" she gasped in terror; "is *he* with you?"

"He? No. Coward, villain, traitor that he is. He has betrayed me. I fly now for my life."

"How have you discovered me?" she asked.

"By a strange chance—a soldier of the garrison is suspected of planning the escape of a prisoner. Von Brandstein had him watched here, he told me that it was his belief you were concealed in the place, with to-morrow he will himself be here. I learnt his treachery and resolved to warn you in time. Ninette, I have done you a cruel injustice all my life—let me atone for it now. Fly with me—I have passports—all is ready. I had a friend who aided me for the sake of services long past. I have a plan—I will seek the King himself—he is close to Berlin—to-morrow he enters. Come, child, for God's sake—time is precious. Oh, Ninette! do not refuse me now!"

She drew herself calmly, proudly away.

"Father, you deceived me once. I can never trust you again."

"Do not say that," he implored. "I know you fear that I will lead you to *him*. I swear I will not; every word I utter is true to the letter. Oh, Ninette, be merciful to yourself, if not to me. How can I leave you in this ruffian's power?"

"Is it not rather late in the day to think of that?"

"Child, you torture me. Will nothing move you? Even if I tell you your husband's salvation depends on your acting as I counsel."

"My husband—Pierre? What do you mean?"

"He is condemned to die. At daybreak, to-morrow, the sentence will be executed. They hurry it for fear the King may reprieve him."

"To die—he? What is his crime?"

"Von Brandstein discovered the plan for his escape. He insulted him, and Pierre struck him."

"Oh my God! my hand again deals him his fate," moaned the wretched girl, as she sank on her narrow bed and gazed at her father's face with blank unseeing eyes.

"Will you not come?" he urged again. She started as if a blow had struck her.

"Come?" she cried wildly. "Flee like a coward and leave him to die? Oh Heaven! what do you think I am?"

"You might see the King, you might intercede," he pleaded, with a pitiful weakness that roused all her scorn.

"Go you and seek the King!" she cried with sudden passion, "and look you, if he die I count you his murderer!" Then she turned and seized her cloak, and flew fleet as an antelope from the house and on through the dark and silent streets, with a resistless speed that made all pursuit useless.

He lingered there a moment, then went forth and confronted the pale and frightened women in the adjoining room.

"She is my daughter," he said, with the strange dazed eyes of a man half asleep, "and her husband dies to-morrow in the garrison yonder at sunrise."

They heard him in silence, too terrified for any words. Then he too drew his cloak closely round him and went out on his errand of danger, knowing each step, each movement now was fraught with deadly peril, and beset by watchful foes.

She meanwhile hurried on, quivering as one under physical torture, her strained eyes fastened on the empty air, her heart throbbing as though it would burst. She had scarce sense or knowledge of what she did. She had but one thought—to see his judges, to proclaim her share in the plot and his innocence and refusal to share in it. It was a wild, mad idea, but the thought of a woman desperate, loving, faithful unto death.

She went on and on, slackening her pace when she saw other figures, increasing it whenever she was alone. She knew nothing of the way, and dared not ask. From some chance word that Böhmer had once dropped she knew the garrison lay southward of her place of concealment, and she took her way there by sheer instinct.

The hour was late. She heard midnight strike from a clock in some church-steeple near by, and the sound filled her heart with terror. At sunrise he was to die. Could she reach him—plead for him—save him yet? On—still on she flew, shrinking back in the shadows of portals at the approach of the night patrol, and hurrying forward with steps to which fear, and love, and longing lent wings, whenever a quiet or deserted street lay before her.

Her face was white and stern, set in a martyr's courage, a soldier's endurance. That she would save him or die with him she was resolved.

She was still weak. The languor of long illness stole over her frame and clogged her steps at last. The spirit within was brave and strong enough, but the poor slight body insensibly weighted it down, and stole away the feverish strength that had come with the shock of peril. Still she pressed forwards, the thought of his danger alone in her heart, nerving her failing strength, lighting her straining eyes as they swept over the gray, dim sky, or searched for the landmark she longed and dreaded to behold. "Shall I ever reach him?" she thought, and a sob shook her frame—a sob of despair, as increasing weakness made itself perceptible, and she knew she was still far from her destination.

Before her in the road she saw a vehicle waiting. The tired horse stood with drooping head. The man on the box was asleep. She came to his side.

"Will you direct me to the garrison?" she implored. "Is it far?"

The man stared at her with sleepy, stupid eyes.

"Too far to walk," he said. "Will you ride?" With the desperation of her one great fear urging her on, she gave no heed to her own poverty—her own inability to offer him payment for his conveyance—she sprang in without an instant's hesitation.

"Drive there!" she said, and the man obeyed.

She threw herself back in the seat, and pressed her hands against her throbbing head. Her brain had no sense but of that one mad resolve—her eyes no gaze, save for that dreaded signal—the first faint rose-flush in the east.

"We are here," said the man. "Two thalers, if you please." She gazed at him bewildered, then instinctively put her hand to search for her money.

"I have but one," she said, offering it.

He swore rudely and angrily. She paid no heed. She sprang from the cab and hurried to the entrance gates with a terror and gladness in her eyes that silenced his fierce complaints. The sentinel stopped her.

"Who goes there?" rang out his challenge in the stillness of the gray wintry dawn. She would have passed on in her blindness and ignorance, but again the voice stayed her steps. "Halt, or I fire."

She paused and looked at him. "For the love of Heaven hear me!" she cried. "There is a man here—a prisoner—condemned to die, is there not? I have brought information that will save him. Can I see the Commandant?"

"At this hour? At this time? You must be mad! Be off! I can hold no parley while on duty."

"Oh stay!" she cried in an agony of entreaty that silenced his rough words and thrilled to his heart in its imploring and piteous despair. "Think what you do. It is a human life you would sacrifice, and an innocent one. If you were in his place what would you say to the man who denied you common justice, even at the last hour?"

Despite himself the man was touched. He looked at her doubtfully.

"What are you to him?" he asked.

"His wife."

"I am sorry for you, but I can do nothing. Even to speak to you now is a risk. Stay—I will pass you on, perhaps the lieutenant may allow you to see your husband ere his sentence is executed."

END OF VOL. I.

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